

Front Row Center:
An Eventful Year

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This essay was originally entitled “The Wealth of Chicago” and my intention was to demonstrate the strength of the performing arts in Chicago, and some parts of its development. There were many great performances in the season of 2019-20, and I planned to use them to analyze the companies and their strengths. Then the two most significant events of that season happened within days of each other and upset the apple cart that I had been intent on displaying before you.

The first was a death of impeccably timed impact. Patricia Barreto was a classically trained singer, born in India with a career throughout the Middle East, who made the jump to performing arts administration. She came to the fore as the marketing manager for Opera Atelier in Montreal in the early teens of this century and was then stolen to serve in the same capacity at the Harris Theater. When Michael Tiknis retired in 2015, the Board of Directors of the Harris searched internationally for his replacement and concluded that the best candidate was right under their noses. They wisely promoted Patricia to CEO in 2016, and she promptly demonstrated her skill in the following three seasons.

Those of an earlier generation may remember the name of Sol Hurok, who was perhaps the most famous classical impresario of the latter twentieth century. Hurok’s name on a production guaranteed the quality of the performers, even if the audience had never heard of the performer. He presented, in New York and across the country and world, classical music artists, singers, opera, ballet and dance companies, even circuses. Each was well-chosen and well-presented, and he grew wealthy on the reputation for excellence that his name represented.

Although tied to the need to program events specifically for the Harris Theater, Patricia Barreto clearly had the vision demonstrated by Hurok. She regarded the world as her oyster and would settle for nothing less than the best performers and productions in the field, and in her fields grew classical orchestras, singing circuses from Canada, indigenous dancers from Australia, opera companies from around the world, cutting edge ballet and choreographers from North America, Europe and Asia, and chamber music from the likes of Lincoln Center.

One of the highlights of the 2019-20 season at the Harris was a full cycle of the Beethoven Symphonies from February 27 to March 3, played on period instruments, two symphonies per evening over six days, with Sir John Eliot Gardner conducting the [Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique with the Monteverdi Choir](#). On the opening night of the series, Sir John announced that Patricia was suffering from a relapse of a case of breast cancer and would be watching the concert from home with her family. A splay of flowers took her place, spotlighted in her customary seat, and so it was for the next five performances. And what performances! The first night gave us the Eighth and Ninth Symphony, followed by the other symphonies in order on following days, until we got to the intermission of the final performance, just before the 7th Symphony.

After the intermission, Sir John turned to the audience and announced that Patricia had succumbed to a long fight with breast cancer and had passed away earlier that evening.

It was akin to the announcement of Gower Champion's death on the opening night of the musical *42nd Street*. The orchestra had been forewarned, barely, and gave such a rendition of the 7th Symphony as I may never hear again. Her funeral was on March 11 and filled Old St Michael's Church to capacity with every luminary in the performing arts in Chicago. It is a testament to her remarkable strength that she received her cancer diagnosis in the same year that she started her position as CEO. Patricia was 45.

The second was no less dramatic. On the afternoon of March 12, as I was returning home from delivering an old friend to Midway Airport, I chanced to turn on the radio in my car to hear the news and received the litany of sports leagues and events being cancelled nationwide due to the Covid pandemic, and thought to myself, 'This does not bode well for Chicago's performing arts.' On Friday, March 13, the cascade of cancellations in Chicago theater started.

You may be aware that I serve as president of The Saints, a volunteer organization that accounts for most of the volunteer ushers for theaters in Chicago. I also serve as the administrator for the computer program that services that function. During the following 36 hours to Sunday, March 15, I cancelled the ushers for in excess of 200 productions, from the Harris and the Auditorium to storefront theaters, as one performance and production after another was cancelled. Covid had done its damage, and the balance of the Chicago theater season was in tatters. Everything from productions at the Lyric Opera to the CSO, the Harris and the Auditorium, from Steppenwolf to Chicago Shakespeare, were cancelled in the blink of a mouse click. Sets were left in place onstage, costumes on their racks, all ready to resume for a season that never came. Theaters have now been dark for a year. As April started, signs of life are stirring, but not until summer, and for most theaters, not until the fall season in 2021 at the earliest.

What alternatives have been offered? The first was a quick pivot to online software, originally designed for corporate communications purposes. There were several alternatives, but the one that quickly rose to the fore was Zoom; it is now as ubiquitous as Kleenex. It is that platform that we use for Chicago Literary Club presentations. The issue with Zoom is that it is designed for personal, close-up, two-way communication, not for large audiences. It was adapted, awkwardly, to performances, schools, and other purposes. One of the best examples was also one of the first, created by the Juilliard School and its students, in an adaptation of Ravel's [Bolero](#). Porchlight Music Theater has done a successful series of panel discussions on that art form. But most others have fallen short of the mark—not for lack of skill on the part of the performers, but for a lack of the energy provided by live performances. Yo Yo Ma playing his cello in a vaccination center is just not the same as Yo Yo Ma in concert at Symphony Center.

The second option that arose was streaming video. This is a recording of a performance, live or recorded, distributed over the Internet via the company's website to an audience at home that may or may not contribute to the event financially. This option

immediately ran into issues with the performer's unions and stalled. There have been some efforts from mid-size theaters with heavy union regulations, from small non-union storefront theaters, and from musical venues such as the CSO. There have even been some hybrid live performances in theaters with a heavily restricted audience that are then live streamed to an Internet audience. While more satisfying than a Zoom performance, the lack of audience engagement in a live-streamed event prevents the satisfying emotional release that comes from a live performance.

There have also been a few scattered live performances *al fresco*, mostly in parking lots and parks near or adjacent to the theaters presenting them. Given the restrictions on audience size and distancing, and the vagaries of Chicago weather, these did not really gain traction. They were not aided by the lack of encouragement from local governmental authorities.

There has been some movement, led in Chicago by the Harris Theater, to combine their website presence with live events, and this approach may well lead the way to a return to full-fledged performances. *Beyond the Aria*, usually a very pricey collaboration of the Harris and the Lyric Opera presented on the Pritzker Stage in Millennium Park, recently opened a trimmed-down season online using a streaming platform that can easily swivel to a live performance format. That joins a growing stable of performances available for free on the Harris Virtual Stage, a new online venture that I believe has a substantial future. This ability to pivot will be key to returning their audiences to a fully live performance platform and may well give them the ability to reach a much larger world-wide audience in future years. The Harris has also initiated several cooperative productions in which they share sponsorship with theaters in other cities, sharing the expenses and risk of major ventures, and this pattern seems to be increasing as well.

There are three types of mass gatherings that are central to our culture, and all three have yet to return in a meaningful way for their adherents: religious services, sports events, and live performances. Live events provide a cohesiveness for their audiences that is unmatched by an electronic or recorded event. It is why we have such a strong affinity for live presentations at CLC. It is the sense of camaraderie, of a shared personal experience, that enlivens these, and it was that sense that was taken away. Zoom and live streaming cannot replace that.

What is required for the performing arts to return? Conceptually, there must be confidence by the leaders of government that a mass gathering such as a theater audience no longer present a danger to public health. There must also be trust and confidence by the public at large that such gatherings are safe for them to attend. These are two quite different requirements. Once those are established, performances will resume, after a period for rehearsal and preparation.

The public health requirement is more technical than perceptual. It involves standards for cleaning, air filtration, audience management and capacity controls, staff training and education, and management of those standards. It is one of the bones of contention that Governor Pritzker will allow fifty *percent* of sports arenas to be utilized, but only

fifty *individuals* in large theaters such as the Auditorium, Harris, or Symphony Center. The dangers are identical; so too should be the restrictions. I would note that the fifty-person limit for the Cliff Dwellers is currently the same as that for the Auditorium or Symphony Center.

Public confidence conversely requires trust by individual members of society. That perception can be quite different depending on the medical and other concerns of each individual and is not confined to public health. Public safety, parking and transportation, weather, time of day all influence a person's choice to venture forth for an event, whether theater, sports, religious activities, or just a trip to the grocery. Public information campaigns are likely to be required to rebuild that trust, but only after a cohesive policy is formulated and disseminated.

The function of government is not to provide a chaotic response in times of crisis, whether they be natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornados and forest fires, manmade disasters such as the failure of the Texas energy grid after a recent storm, or pandemics such as Covid. The most important thing that government can provide is clear and cohesive leadership; chaos in leadership only deepens any crisis. We have further come to depend on our government in the past century to provide economic relief and practical support in the face of such events. None of that has happened during this pandemic for the performing arts: not at the national level, the state level, or the city.

One measure starting to gain acceptance as I write this would be the use of a document issued by the Centers for Disease Control or similar competent authority confirming that an individual has been fully vaccinated: a health or vaccination passport, much like the yellow vaccination card issued by the CDC for yellow fever and other diseases for international travel, probably in electronic or hybrid electronic/paper formats. This has been discussed not only for gatherings of an audience, but for sports arenas, airline flights and cruise ships, admission to bars and restaurants, and other places of public assembly. There are potential pitfalls involving medical, religious/moral, and other exemptions to be traversed, but I believe that this may well become the standard for public discourse, and that you will have to show your passport together with your boarding pass or ticket to gain admission to your flight or event.

The Covid pandemic has dealt a near death blow to the performing arts. There is no theater that can long endure without access to its audience, and I would further argue that there is no culture that can endure without the ability to express its emotions in common parlance. Theaters as we know them are scaled to their audiences; that is true of the storefront theater seating an audience of 50 or the Metropolitan Opera. They cannot operate economically, no matter their size, at 10, 25 or 50 percent of capacity for long. Audiences similarly need access to movies and live performances, whether King Lear, the CSO or Lyric Opera, Lollapalooza, James Bond, or The Lion King. Equally, performers need the energy provided by live audiences and performances. Without them, their skills atrophy, their energy flags.

Crises produce change, and the society that emerges from the other side is never the same as the one prior to the crisis. Stealing from Thomas Wolfe's title, "You Can't Go Home Again:" think of the prewar Edwardian society of 1914, and then, after World War 1 and the Spanish Flu, think of the Roaring Twenties, post-war Paris, and Bauhaus Berlin. Thus it will be in this instance: Zoom and virtual performances have forever changed the way the performing arts are delivered, opening new styles and means of creation.

We will not be able to return to, nor satisfied with, the status quo prior to March 2020. The theaters, artists and audiences will need to incorporate changes as we return. These may well be financial, with new ways of generating income from online distribution; procedural, with adaptations for vaccination passports, ticketless entry, online programs and more; unions will have to adapt to a new reality of online distribution in their contracts; for performers, direct audience involvement may be a thing of the past; audiences may well become national and international in scope, rather than strictly local, and not always present in the physical theater; audiences may also have the choice of attending in person or, if the weather is bad or the traffic horrendous, virtually; curtain time may become less relevant: if you miss the live performance or have conflicting events, you may be able to return to it later in an online encore. Not all the changes will be the result of the pandemic; many are due to the capabilities of online distribution, smartphones and other electronic devices present before this upset, now provoked by the pandemic and effected by the constraints of lockdowns and isolation.

Beyond that, what will be the artistic character of the seasons to come? Given the social unrest around us, will our stages reflect that unrest? Will *Black Lives Matter*? Or will we be looking to escape, through musicals, comedies and other entertainment that takes us out of the crises of the everyday? The Roaring Twenties certainly indicated an interest in escapism, of getting away from the issues of the moment, but will that be the case in the 2020s?

The performing arts *will* recover. They did in Shakespeare's era in the face of the Black Death; they survived Oliver Cromwell's moralistic bans; they have done so in wartime, even in concentration camps, and during economic debacles. What we need is to *ease* the recovery; *stimulate* regrowth, not stymie it, and make the inevitable flowering of the arts easier for the future.