

VULTURE

What Socially Distanced Live Performance Might Look Like

By Justin Davidson | MAY 14, 2020



David Byrne's *American Utopia*, choreographed by Annie-B Parson. Photo: Abigail Lester

Just off Columbus Avenue, a self-appointed DJ pulled up to an extra-wide sidewalk and greeted the weekend by blasting salsa from his car stereo. A small crowd gathered to dance at a distance, bringing some safety-rated joy to the neighborhood. It wasn't a packed club or a raucous street party, like the kind that birthed salsa decades ago, but it felt like a sign, an early crocus announcing the rebirth of live entertainment.

The "foreseeable future" is a contradiction in terms, and among the infinity of things nobody knows is when we'll be able to attend a live performance. It's likely to be a long time before several thousand people will pack an auditorium or weave through a lobby at intermission, before actors can grapple onstage again, a makeup artist dabs foundation on cast members' noses, or an opera singer stands in the path of a colleague's barrage of vibrating air. The immense and costly apparatus of culture — theaters, opera houses, and orchestra halls — have become a liability, ill-suited to the COVID-19 age. Instead, productions will have to find less finely tailored venues, like outdoor public spaces and hangarlike halls. Even stars, waiting out the pandemic by the phone and expecting a call from an august institution immediately when things reopen, could be bench-sitting for a season or two.

But there is a cohort of artists and presenters who, long before the great contagion, were already rethinking the physical relationships between performers, audience, and space. They rebelled against the tyranny of the proscenium, placed intimate shows in vast rooms, coaxed audiences to roam, and expanded their palette with electronics — all techniques that could now prove essential. Idled artists and disoriented presenters have begun sketching in a transformed world of live performance adapted to a murky near-future of indeterminate length, an interregnum between lockdown and freedom. They've begun to conjure an art made of new constraints in which the strictures of social distancing become expressive tools. In Stuttgart, Germany, members of shuttered opera and orchestras have launched the most intimate possible concert series, "1:1," in which a solo musician performs for a single audience member in spots around the city, including the nearly vacant airport.

Art forms and their institutions shape each other and fade away together. When opera and orchestral music outgrew aristocratic party rooms, they birthed specialized forms of architecture. Opera houses (in the 18th century) and symphony halls (in the 19th) accommodated larger audiences and beefed-up ensembles, required more resonant instruments and heftier voices, and prompted composers to imagine longer, louder, larger works. Amplification, arenas, and pop music all fed each other's development. Today, the whole intertwined arrangement of form and infrastructure is spectacularly vulnerable. Staff must be paid, and big buildings cost money even when they're dark.

Because nobody knows whether today's rules will still be in force tomorrow, most institutions continue to trot out season schedules that may never come to pass. The Metropolitan Opera is preparing to open its 2020–21 season on September 21 with a gala performance of Verdi's *Aida*, starring soprano Anna Netrebko, followed on consecutive nights by *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* and *Roberto Devereux*. At this point, that schedule looks delusional, and for a slow-moving juggernaut like the Met, the choice is binary: You either turn the lights on or you don't. (And the consequences of another dark season are dire.) This fallow time gives opera houses and symphony halls a rare chance to tend to their facilities. Lincoln Center and the New York Philharmonic had planned to begin renovations on Geffen Hall in 2022; maybe they could scramble and start as soon as construction crews can begin work safely. In the meantime, activity might shift to more versatile venues, without fixed seats or immovable stages, with fewer hallways and technical restrictions — spaces like the Park Avenue Armory or the Shed at Hudson Yards.

If culture is to thrive, even amid deprivation, it will have to nurture new forms of invention in different kinds of space. The theatrical requirements of the next phase — tiny casts, restricted audiences, simple sets, and plenty of space — will be intensified by a scarcity of money. Flexibility is precious. Instead of clinging to long-range plans, then scuttling them one at a time, organizations need productions that can be rustled together more or less on the fly. The mantra of the next few years must be smaller, quicker, cheaper.

Even big institutions are coming to grips with a reality that threatens their existence. "Importing a major international opera production is a heavy financial lift, and the ultimate in advance planning," says Jane Moss, Lincoln Center's artistic director. "We may not be able to do that. But there can be extraordinary creativity in small things." Moss envisions the kind of performance she can scatter across Lincoln Center's campus, with its plazas, lawns, arcades, a park, and venues of various sizes. "Can you do an installation where the audience is moving around to different destinations, like a pilgrimage?" she muses. You can, but success can be dangerous: "The more ingenious and intriguing you get, the more people want to come together to see what you've done." And an unforeseen bottleneck could prove disastrous, even lethal.

Across the country, Cal Performances, based at the University of California, Berkeley, recently unveiled a rich season of chamber and orchestral concerts, world music, and dance that amounts to a mission statement by the new artistic director Jeremy Geffen. That series, too, looks improbable, but has some flexibility built in.

“Our obligation is to be ready for reentry whenever it happens, and you can’t be ready unless you plan,” Geffen says. “We’re running multiple scenarios, some that incorporate social distancing in our concert halls, some that incorporate streaming.” Geffen says he is optimistic because everyone, from artists to technical staff, understands the need to improvise. “If I’m optimistic at all, it’s because I work on the campus of one of the great universities, where there’s traditionally been great resistance to remote instruction. Now, higher education has moved to remote instruction overnight.”



The Mile-Long Opera, from 2018, is one precedent. Photo: Liz Ligon

The arts are becoming woven into our daily lives in startling ways. Every night at 7, New Yorkers stage an impromptu percussion concert with an orchestra of thousands. Zoom meetings resemble the gridded TV-screen constructions of Nam June Paik. And even without music, we all become dancers in an elaborate urban choreography as soon as we leave our homes. Each of us watches warily as others approach, gauging body language, speed, and trajectory, and we adjust our own movements accordingly. City kids of my generation are rediscovering the peripheral-vision anti-mugging skills we were raised with. Our children, who grew up moving through their world with eyes lowered and ears occupied, unafraid of bumping into strangers, now have to learn situational awareness from scratch. “Choreographic issues are part of our lives now,” says Annie-B Parson, the founder of Big Dance Theater. “The presence of the body in space is suddenly electrified and important.”

In dance, the logistics of spacing people out can be a productive constraint. “I’ve always loved the six-foot distance. It’s really beautiful and elegant,” Parson says. That aesthetic worked its way into her choreography for David Byrne’s *American Utopia*, in which she spread dancers out in a wide mesh. Even pre-coronavirus, Parson was already attuned to the poetry of a single body or small object set in vast surroundings. “I had an idea for a piece with a tiny log cabin in the middle of a giant space. Inside was a little fireplace that you could smell from far away, and just a few people would be admitted at a time. Sound came from the balconies.” That work never happened, but the idea has lately been tugging at her again.

The key to COVID-ian culture will be to leverage that sort of sensibility and make logistical choices feel like artistic ones. I can think of a dozen powerful experiences from the recent past that might seem suddenly timely. The High Line is closed now, because its history of funneling crowds in both directions along a narrow pathway makes it uniquely unsuited as a public space. But in October 2018, audience members lined up for the quietly moving *Mile-Long Opera*, marching in quasi-single file and giving politely wide berth to hundreds of individual singers spaced out along its length. The Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Lang, who wrote the piece, doubts the opera is ready for a revival: “Seeing all those people wearing masks and singing at you could be terrifying,” he says. (As it happens, last year, Lang also wrote *Protect Yourself From Infection*, a prescient choral work based on a government pamphlet published during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic.)

But guiding an audience safely through a landscape while performers remain still could be fruitful and sublime. That is also the idea behind John Luther Adams’s 2009 work *Inuksuit*, in which 34 percussionists fan out across a hill, a park, or any open space, mingling their thuds and tintinnabulations with the locality’s distinctive ambient noise. “Composers are better positioned to save our culture than traditional music is, because if you’re designing a new piece and a new experience you can try to make the situation seem as normal as possible,” Lang says. The first fallback options — play to an empty house (as a small sub-ensemble of the Berlin Philharmonic has done) or distribute a few hundred listeners around a hall that could seat 2,000 — would only emphasize the melancholy weirdness. That kind of event can have an impact as a ritual of mourning, a dramatization of all we’ve lost. But it’s no way to lose ourselves in some alternate, virus-free world of the imagination.

The Armory’s Drill Hall is an immense place ideal for compact shows. A 55,000-square foot expanse with a high vaulted ceiling and a long balcony, it has hosted massive productions and one- or two-person performances to phenomenal effect. In *Goldberg*, a 2015 production staged by the artist Marina Abramovic, pianist Igor Levit performed Bach’s hour-long *Goldberg Variations* on a piano that glided glacially along a runway into the center of the audience, then completed a single revolution, while the lights gradually dimmed to almost total darkness. At the time, the project felt arch and puzzling; now it seems almost prescient.

“We want to preserve the sensation of intimacy without actual proximity,” says the Armory’s president and executive producer, Rebecca Robertson. She cautions, though, that what looks like a spare, meditative event often requires days of frantic teamwork and complicated load-in — activities that are impossible now. Producing a COVID-safe evening out means mapping out every step for performers, audiences, and staff, and asking dozens of new previously unconsidered questions. Where do the temperature screeners stand? Can a show be short enough for safety and still leave audiences feeling like they got their money’s worth? How do audience members avoid squeezing through a ticket barrier, performers move from dressing room to stage without bumping into anyone, stagehands work in synch without making contact, or acousticians compensate for the scarcity of soft, sound-absorbing bodies in the seats?

The phased reopening might be the moment when the Shed's McCourt Theater, with its puffy parka wrapping and rolling shell, proves its worth. "The building was designed for a future we knew we couldn't predict," says artistic director Alex Poots. Dedicated to commissioning new work from scratch and guided by a philosophy that all genres and arts are created equal, the institution is now trying to put its theoretic nimbleness into practice. Production staff are studying ways to dispose audience members around a large space. Lighting designers are working out a flexible matrix that can be controlled from a laptop. Operations managers are plotting ways to bring audiences into the theater directly from the plaza at Hudson Yards, eliminating the need for escalators, elevators, or choke points. A row of individual portable bathrooms can be set up along one wall. And most important, Poots is recruiting artists who can use the constraints instead of chafing against them.

"I'm finding that they really want to lean into the restrictions and the challenges. When I call and say You're not going to get everything you want, they just laugh out loud and say We can work with anything. We just can't work with nothing."

To see how some artists might alchemize social distancing into a collective experience, I called the opera director Yuval Sharon (another Macarthur winner). Just before the world locked down, Sharon and his company, the Industry, opened Sweet Land, about the first colonial battles over America's turf. The performances took place outdoors, with the audience migrating through Los Angeles State Historic Park. "Negotiating the pop-up venues ... can get a little tricky," wrote the critic Mark Swed in the Los Angeles Times. "There are steps to trip on in the dark. It is easy to scrape yourself on raw lumber. There are no amenities, no opera house coddling. No wine bar, chocolate, coffee, or much of anything."

The production had to shut down in March (though the cast returned for one last run-through so they could preserve it on video) and it's too logistically complex for the current moment, but the approach might endure. "I'm interested in giving audiences an enormous sense of freedom," Sharon says. "That can be the freedom to answer the question of What does this mean? for themselves, and it can also mean physical freedom. Many of the projects we've done have no set path for the audience to go. But I also love the notion of putting tape on the floor and using distance to create unexpected patterns." Sharon has been mulling the idea of an L.A. production of *The Force of Things: An Opera for Objects* by Ashley Fure, which Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart presented last summer at the Gelsey Kirkland Arts Center in Brooklyn. The audience files into a room lined with subwoofers and hanging paper columns; the ultra-low hum sets the paper vibrating, translating an inaudible rumble into a woodsy rustling. The second part takes place in a larger gallery, with players spaced far apart, surrounding the audience.

"This might be the moment that piece has been waiting for," Sharon says. "The depth of the sonic experience, the ability to hear live music in a reverberant space, even when it's done by an intimate group of players — that could be cathartic."

None of the artists and presenters I spoke to were blithely optimistic; none saw calamity as a career opportunity. All recognized that even as some parts of society flail back to life, the interlinked ecosystems of theater, opera, dance, and music will struggle far longer. Colleagues will remain idle, audiences will be afraid, institutions will stumble, or even disappear. A global performance circuit that depends on frequent flying and lavish support will necessarily turn inward, scale down, and go local, a situation that could produce a whole new set of revelations.

"If we can't import talent, which is what our whole industry thrives on, we lose a lot of profound experiences," says the MacArthur-winning wizard of the flute, Claire Chase. "But look at what we gain. An institution that has never paid much attention to new work or local artists all of a sudden has to pay attention to them. Until now,

the way to get programmed at a major New York institution was to do a premiere in Australia or Europe and then have it brought back. That might change.” Chase follows with an e-mailed list of “folks who will show the big houses the way,” including two Brooklyn-based organizations, the three-composer collective Kinds of Kings and the Iranian Female Composers Association.

For now, these enthusiasms and ideas bang up against frustrating impediments. Orchestras can’t play in tune or in time if they’re spaced at six feet intervals. Performers need each other’s physical presence. The choreographer Kyle Abraham (yet one more MacArthur laureate) has used dance to treat gritty topics: police brutality, dementia, the prison system. But COVID-19 has thrown him off balance, and when I reached him, he was feeling lonely and rattled in a Los Angeles Airbnb, thinking about all the work he cannot do. “I can create a lot of sketches by myself, but at some point, I need to put some fat and muscle onto them, and I’m influenced by the dancers I collaborate with. They learn the dance from my body, and I need to see theirs.”

The urgent need we all feel now will eventually become material. Isolation makes it impossible to take a simple gesture for granted, and one day it will intensify the drama of two dancers coming close enough to graze each other’s skin. “People will be more sensitive to touch,” Abraham says. “Human contact is going to play to the senses in a visceral way.”