



Jatka78, Festival of
Nothing, Prague,
Czechia, 2020.
Photo: Jakub Jelen.
Courtesy of Jatka78

Up Front

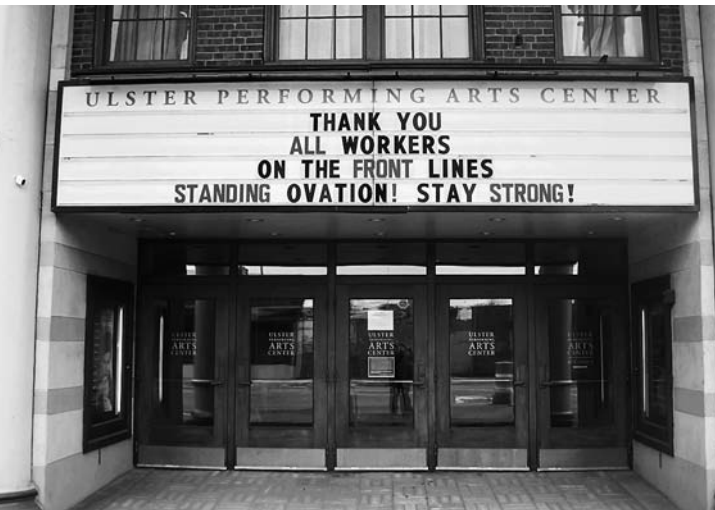
COVID-19: A NOTE

Tom Sellar

The American theater as we knew it unraveled in the span of just a few days in March 2020. As the United States shut down large-capacity public spaces amid the coronavirus pandemic, theaters closed abruptly. (Many did so voluntarily before individual states issued mandates.) Within one week in mid-March, virtually every performing arts venue—from Broadway show palaces to tiny basement incubators—halted performances of their current productions. Just a few days later most canceled the remainder of their 2019–20 seasons, then eliminated nearly all summer programming. Refunds were issued, depleting cash reserves. As the lethal threat and long-term scope of the crisis became clear, theaters shuttered their buildings, cut salaries and furloughed staff, scrapped artist and vendor contracts, and deferred annual fundraising galas. At the time in spring when most organizations announce their next year of programs, they called them off instead. By summer 2020, fall seasons had been cancelled too, and some theaters had already scrapped performances in spring 2021. Others had already announced permanent closures.

These devastating losses came in a relentless series of announcements popping up daily on our screens in emails, posts, and news releases. On social media, the theater community mourned all their lost labors and vanished opportunities, but this resignation alternated with fear. With no earned income, no public subsidy, and philanthropic donations vanishing amid a global economic meltdown, theaters not only contended with temporarily dark houses (as they did after 9/11); after just a few brutal, disorienting weeks, some companies faced permanent closure.

At the time of this writing (May 2020), the only clarity was about the severity of the crisis. Cultural institutions, deemed inessential by the authorities, will be among the last sectors to reopen. And until a vaccine is tested, manufactured, and distributed across the globe, audiences will likely remain scarce for hours-long indoor events. Meanwhile, theater—the most social of art forms, and the most economically precarious—not only depends on public performances for fiscal survival; it also needs bodies in



(top left): Paramount Theatre, Seattle, 2020. Photo: Nick Bolton, Unsplash

(top right): Bardavon 1869 Opera House, Poughkeepsie, NY, 2020. Photo: Kris Konyak. Courtesy of Bardavon 1869 Opera House

(bottom left): Ulster Performing Arts Center, Kingston, NY, 2020. Photo: Betsy Garthwaite. Courtesy of Ulster Performing Arts Center

(bottom right): The World Theatre, Kearney, NE, 2020. Photo: Edwin Hooper, Unsplash

proximity for creative energy. Perpetuating the American theater will require a spiritual commitment as well as a financial one.

There are a few bright spots in an otherwise dismal situation. Every theater will need to reevaluate its priorities—and not just for safety protocols or public health. Reaffirming, if not altering, what kind of artistic work we pursue (and why and how) could reinvigorate the field.

Also, with no other opportunities, stage artists, writers, and critics migrated online, creating real-time art events and public programs on Zoom and other platforms. Many did so reluctantly, lamenting the lack of liveness, but others have embraced new possibilities in these media. While some talented professionals will now inevitably drift to making film and television, the pandemic may also force the American theater to finally carve out a meaningful space for itself online, where it is currently maintaining a sense of community, connectivity, and, for now, solidarity. *Theater's* editors are following these developments with a mournful heart for all that has been lost and hope for change and renewal. We plan to present and explore them in future editions.