



When the Show Can't Go On: Orlando Entertainment in the Time of COVID

- [JULY 14, 2020](#)



By Kate Bustillos

For over 10 years, I have had the privilege of making magic and bringing stories to life in Orlando, Florida. I wielded Poseidon's trident at Universal's Islands of Adventure, earned my wings as a Fairy Godmother-in-Training at Disney's Magic Kingdom, and directed *Broadway Jr.* productions with Central Florida Performing Arts.

Lauded as the “theme park capital of the world,” Orlando is a haven for the young at heart and home to a vibrant performing arts community—my community—whose talent and innovation have earned the city’s reputation as a leader in world-class entertainment and immersive storytelling.

But, in the wake of COVID-19, Orlando’s entertainment industry has suddenly found itself treading water.

Productions closed. Auditions stopped. The theme parks went dark.

With an uncertain future ahead, Orlando’s theatre professionals face a unique dilemma, forcing many to think outside the Black Box.

I spoke with Terry Olson, a seasoned theatre professional and Director of Orange County Arts and Cultural Affairs. He is a tireless champion for the arts in Central Florida and shared some of his insights on the logistical and funding challenges facing the local arts community since social distancing mandates first went into effect.



ORLANDO BALLET PERFORMS EXCERPTS FROM SWAN LAKE, COURTESY OF CREATIVE CITY PROJECT (PHOTO: CHARLES SCHUETT)

Kate Bustillos

Could you talk a bit about your role as Director of Arts and Cultural Affairs and how your team is navigating community and arts events during the pandemic?

Terry Olson

My staff is all working from home, but we're making the best of virtual platforms. For instance, I offered a tour of downtown Orlando public art that introduced listeners to not only the art, but to many of the artists who were located across the country. Those participating could ask questions of the artists. I have begun a weekly email update with brief articles about major happenings in the arts in our community.

There are also several weekly or biweekly virtual meetings with Executive Directors or Artistic Directors of our arts organizations to share ideas for coping with the current restrictions on 'normal life.' We've also been working on helping efforts to raise funds for out-of-work performers and visual artists.

Kate Bustillos

Do you think virtual platforms have the opportunity to attract new audiences who previously lacked the ability or desire to attend live theatrical productions?

Terry Olson

There may be ways of attracting new audiences, while probably losing some of the traditional audience. It is a new tool and we have new parameters. Life always has parameters and the arts are about creating meaningful life within those parameters. One of the [unique aspects] about live theatre is that it is collaborative in that the response of the audience is heard and felt by the performers and the audience knows that the performance is real-time. I think performers will find ways to develop interactive elements to virtual platforms. If not, then we are really talking about making movies and the audience will expect movie-quality technical aspects.

... When producing a theatrical production, I think through every aspect of the time the audience will spend in our theatre. It is a total experience. And coming from a

background of performing audience-interactive theatre at Renaissance Festivals, World Fairs and Walt Disney World, the kind of direct feed-back from audiences that could walk away at any time helped shape the experience to make it one that the audience members would want to continue experiencing.



AUDIENCE OUTSIDE SENEFF ARTS PLAZA AT DR. PHILLIPS CENTER, COURTESY OF CREATIVE CITY PROJECT (PHOTO: CODY BOARD)

Kate Bustillos

How can theatre professionals use their craft to engage with their community and meet its needs, both emotionally and tangibly, during this time?

Terry Olson

The Orlando Shakes has been doing a weekly 'Thursday Throwback' where actors who've worked with them say a few words and then share a monologue from their

home interspersed with pictures of the performance it came from. Opera Orlando has been doing a Friday noon 'High Notes' virtual where the Opera's director talks to performers and they do some performances. Mad Cow Theatre is hosting virtual play readings and conversations with playwrights. The SAK Comedy Lab has opened with social distancing and masks on both the audience and the performers. Disney performer Billy Flanagan has been riding his bicycle to various people's homes and doing a song and dance routine for them in their front yard. Many musicians have been doing living-room concerts that they are streaming.

I'm proud of my city. I'm proud of my fellow creatives who are doing their best to meet our community where it is. I want them to know that it's okay to create for their own sake too. We are all still processing. Grieving. Navigating how to reconcile social distancing with an art form fueled by physical collaboration.

But storytelling always finds a way. It is ingrained in every culture, spanning from the earliest records of human history. I think of carvings on ancient caves and hieroglyphs etched in burial chambers. Stories are legacies, time capsules, wisdom, and warnings. Stories—whether spoken, written, performed, or crafted—have the power to offer hope and healing.

Creatives have developed an ability to harness this mysterious, ancient power for entertainment, education, and human connection. The performing arts community is fighting to keep the art of storytelling alive, but they need our support. This can't be their burden to bear on their own, because we all benefit from the arts.

Below is a brief list of some of the innovative efforts of Orlando's performing arts scene, and how you can support them.

- [Orange County Arts and Cultural Affairs](#) has provided information to virtual events hosted by creative professionals.
- [Orlando Repertory Theatre](#) offers virtual youth camps and classes.
 - [Support the Rep](#)
- [Orlando Shakespeare Theatre](#) offers virtual adult, teen, and children's classes via Zoom and virtual "throwback" performances featuring actors recreating their roles from past productions.

- [Support the Shakes](#)
- [Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts](#) has developed a creative approach to hosting live theatre summer camps, while still practicing social distancing.
 - [Support DPAC](#)
- [Mad Cow Theatre](#) offers livestream play readings and virtual festivals.
 - [Support Mad Cow](#)
- [Garden Theatre](#) offers virtual classes and online resources for youth theatre education.
 - [Support Garden Theatre](#)
- [Central Florida Community Arts](#) offers virtual workshops and classes and private lessons for creatives of all ages.
 - [Support CFCA](#)
- [Victorian Horror Troupe Phantasmagoria](#) offers live online events featuring readings and performances celebrating the macabre.
 - [Learn more](#)

Kate Bustillos is a former children's theater director and educator, and now works as a freelance writer and editor. When she's not writing or lost in a good book, she enjoys traveling, playing indie boardgames with her husband, and singing. Kate is a proud MFA student at Spalding University's School of Creative and Professional Writing where she writes stories about ghosts, magic, and loud-mouthed mermaids.

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