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BALLET IN THE AGE OF COVID

Samuel Johnson famously said, “When a man knows he is to be hanged...it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

I have often thought back to that astute observation since spring 2020 when the comfortable world many of us enjoyed seemed to collapse. COVID concentrated our minds in horrifying ways, but it also forced us to find new ways to enjoy our favorite artforms, in my case, classical ballet.

Why ballet? Why does anybody love any artform? I grew up in a family immersed in classical music. When I saw ballet in the 1950s as a child, it seemed like the next step beyond music—as Balanchine famously said, “See the Music.” To the surprise of many in large cities like New York, access to world class classical ballet was possible nationwide in the U.S. in the late 1950s. The Soviets released films of the Bolshoi which circulated in movie theaters. Balanchine dancers frequently performed live on television of that era. Little girls of my generation regularly took ballet classes. I like to think I showed early critical acumen in recognizing at an early age that a performing career was not an option for me, but my experiences watching ballet and dancing myself as a child were the origins of my lifelong love of the artform.

I retired from teaching in 2011. When I was teaching philosophy of art, I had to slog through the familiar arguments concerning the essence of art. I leaned toward Wittgensteinian flexibility and still do. Like the U.S. Congress in the legislation establishing the National Endowment for the Arts, I default to an extensional list of artforms and avoid trying to find an essence. The exercise of trying to define art is useful for students, but I prefer to move on to more interesting questions, such as identity, intellectual property, and standards of interpretation and evaluation.

Once retired, I was able to travel to see great ballet companies that I could not previously squeeze into my schedule. It was a glorious time for me. I would catch up with local art museums in the morning, open rehearsals in the afternoons, performances in the evening. New York, Washington, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, London. Heaven!

A persistent search committee in 2014 talked me into taking on a new part-time gig as Secretary-Treasurer at the American Society for Aesthetics. I enjoyed being surrounded by people who loved a wide range of all the artforms and attending the many meetings and conferences sponsored by ASA, but I still worked in some personal trips to ballet companies in North American and Europe. Life was good!

Enter COVID. Theaters shut down in mid-March 2020, with no end in sight. Ballet companies responded with pleas for financial support and found ways to keep their dancers busy and paid in COVID bubbles and with Zoom classes and rehearsals. They also gave audiences a wealth of taped performances on-line from their archives, gems they had never before released. Most could be saved to our personal digital collections, giving dance lovers and writers a treasure trove of resource material we had never before enjoyed. This was no doubt one of the best and most unexpected benefits of the COVID shut-down.

We all worried about the survival of beloved companies and wondered what it would take to see them again in person. We worried about the careers of favorite dancers in a profession with notoriously short careers. The thrill of live performance was sorely missed the more we stared at our computer screens alone. A few companies ventured forth with work created and performed in COVID bubbles that we could see on-line. By summer of 2021, a few were trying outdoor performances with masked dancers, giving us a taste of what we had missed.

In September 2021, New York City re-opened and led the way nationwide. New York City Ballet performed at Lincoln Center after an 18-month absence. I was determined to be there on opening night and screamed and cheered and cried with everybody else. Audiences were required to show proof of vaccination and indoor masking, but it was a price worth paying. American Ballet Theatre returned to Lincoln Center in October 2021 after a summer of touring to outdoor venues around the country. The Colorado Ballet returned to the historic opera house in Denver in October 2021. San Francisco Ballet returned in February 2022, demanding proof of boosters and N95 masks, but that again seemed such a small price to pay.

COVID is now seemingly an on-going challenge that we are learning to live with, getting booster shots when available and keeping N95 masks handy for

venturing into crowds where the latest variant might be lurking. And it has changed forever my appreciation of the artform I have loved my entire life, classical ballet. Although I no longer teach aesthetics, I do a little writing now and then and continue to voraciously read critics, historians, and biographers of the dance world. I treasure live performance more than ever. Nothing can replace the thrill of the unexpected in the theater.

But I also treasure what seem to be permanent evolutions in how companies present their works. Several are offering digital subscriptions to their theatrical performances for those who can't travel, an enhancement I hope they continue and others will explore. Most offer digital supplements to their theatrical performances, sometimes as an incentive to join their Friends component, sometimes available to the general public.

Decades ago, I wrote an essay noting the challenges of writing dance criticism. Among other things, access to recordings of important works was severely restricted, making meaningful analysis and comparison not just difficult but often impossible. Although that's still somewhat true, the wealth of material released during the worst of COVID, along with the widespread and growing acceptance of digital programming by companies, have greatly improved the working conditions for all dance writers.

COVID has significantly altered my own appreciation of ballet. Although I still treasure live theater performance, I regularly also seek out digital performances to supplement and enhance that experience. What comes next? I look forward to finding out what the creative community has in store to breathe continuing new life into this treasured, venerable artform.