

PROTOCOL

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Members of the New York Army National Guard walk near the Theatre Development Fund's TKTS station in Times Square, New York, with service dogs provided by Puppies Behind Bars on April 23, 2020. The dogs are supporting service members and first responders involved with COVID-19 response efforts.

Creativity takes courage: an optimistic outlook for the arts

BY DAVID H. ROSENBERG

THERE HAS BEEN MUCH conjecture about what the arts will look like in a post-COVID-19 world—much of it reactionary, pessimistic, and short-sighted.

As humans, we thrive on the need to interact and socialize with others—to share real experiences, to witness live events happening in front of us as a measure of all of life's experiences. Why should we believe that this innate human need will change because of the challenges we face today, challenges that have also been faced by generations before us?

We know the best minds in the world are racing to find treatments and vaccines, and in the meantime, artists are using their creativity and tenacity to continue bringing the arts to their audiences.

It is with this perspective, a more positive

perspective with a longer view than much of what is currently being written, that leads me to offer a different way to look at this.

Art has persevered throughout some of history's most horrible events—both man-made and naturally occurring.

During World War II the British government initially closed theatres fearing they'd be destroyed by bombs, but eventually the closure restrictions were lifted and the theatres were re-opened to help distract the British public from the everyday horrors in the world around them.

September 11th stopped everything in the US. Most people did not go to work, transportation shut down, airports closed, and theatres shuttered. In Chris Jones' article "How the Shows Went On After 9/11, With an Assist From Ovid," he writes, "...

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it became clear to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Schuyler G. Chapin, his commissioner of cultural affairs, that something had to be done quickly to restore at least some

sense of continuance to the city, to avert a potential economic crisis that might cost artists and technicians their jobs and, in doing so, declare that the terrorist attacks had not done permanent damage.... And so, the word went out...Reopen.” And, theatre became part of the fabric of what helped heal New York.

After Hurricane Katrina, the Saenger Theatre in New Orleans was destroyed. The breaking levees flooded the theatre several feet deep. It took nearly 10 years to rebuild, but the public saw the value in recreating a space for public assembly and the arts.

Let's step back from our panic and reactionary thinking and take the long view.

The 1989, Loma Prieta earthquake created serious damage to San Francisco's Geary Theater (ironically constructed after the 1906 earthquake) when parts of the ceiling collapsed, leaving tons of debris scattered below. Again, the public rallied and supported a renovation of the theatre that reopened in 1996.

These examples show that we intrinsically understand that these building types, and more importantly what happens in them, is critically important to us. This is less about where theatre happens (and by “theatre,” I include all the performing arts and entertainment) and more about making sure that it does happen. It is about what we value. As the father of a teenage girl, I can tell you from firsthand observation that social media platforms will never take the place of person-to-person interaction. Our recent sheltering at home has shown us just that. While we can still connect over video and phone calls, we're all longing for non-virtual, in-person, social interactions.

Lindsey Lazarte, writing for *The Ascent* about the importance of human interaction in the time of technology (<http://estalink.us/x72k7>), states it perfectly, “I, myself, have fallen victim to this effect of technology as well. I often neglect to ask how my friends are doing because I know I can just easily check on Instagram or Facebook. ... However, the real thing—the actual in-person exchange—is a BILLION times better. Human interaction is always more rewarding.”

So where does this leave us today, as we experience a brand-new world event situation that evolves every time we turn on the news? This is the question on everybody's mind. How should we react to what we know today? What should we do differently? Should we redefine what has worked so well up until now? Why do we need to change? I say: Stop. Let's step back from our panic and reactionary thinking and take the long view. I have more faith in our medical community than to think that this virus will forever reset how we gather or even if we gather. I realize that things look very uncertain from where we all sit at the moment, and I'm not dismissing the pain that shutting down this part of our community will create. In fact, it's this pain specifically that should focus our drive back to some level of pre-virus normalcy.

On May 3rd, CBS's *Sunday Morning* aired a story about how the world dealt with the threat of polio. This disease was remarkably similar to COVID-19 in that everyone who caught the disease experienced different symptoms; however, unlike COVID-19, this disease targeted mainly younger people. For a long time, there was no cure and no treatment. Six years later in 1955, Jonas Salk developed a vaccine. The world did not stop. We persevered and there is no reason to think we cannot do this again. (<http://estalink.us/rzzt8>)

Leading doctors and scientists around the world are working around the clock to find treatments and vaccines. And this is not the first time our global medical community has

faced this kind of challenge. I remember the reception waiting for us when we returned home from China where we adopted our youngest daughter (that same teenager mentioned above)—it was the height of the SARS epidemic. We were told don't travel, keep your other daughter home from school, and don't interact with anyone. Sound familiar? And yet that virus was kept under control. Along with H1N1, Ebola, Avian Flu, MERS, and others. Yes, each of these viruses has a different level of infection and mortality, but the global medical community handled these outbreaks, and they will handle this one, too.

... science will find a solution and the arts will help us rebuild.

Will there be a next crisis? Count on it. To think anything else would be burying one's head in the sand. This is not the first time the threshold between human and animal viruses has been crossed, and it won't be the last. When the human genome was “cracked” in 2003, no one thought it was possible, but science and medicine rose to the occasion. We know more about what makes humans tick than at any time in history, although I'm sure if I asked anyone in the medical field, they would say we've only begun.

The drive to create art is one of the most extraordinary things about our species. No other species on this planet creates art the way we do and for the reasons we do. We create to beautify our surroundings, but we also create to challenge, involve, awaken, educate, feel, give voice to the voiceless, bear witness, offer commentary, and for a host of other reasons too numerous to note here. But, art must also give hope. There must be a sense that it is all for something and that our time here is not meaningless. I honestly believe we'll put these strange days

behind us—and yes, there are stranger days to come—but pivoting isn't our only option in the face of a challenge. Just because we can't see over the hill in front of us, we don't completely rethink what we do and how we do it. We ponder, we adapt, and we move forward. But we do NOT take what is the best of us and toss it out and start again.

With all of this forced time at home, those who write, choreograph, paint, sculpt, draw, and a hundred other forms of creation are going to hit the ground running when this comes to an end. A renaissance of pent-up creativity and imagination is waiting for all of us, just past this dark tunnel.

Let us remember, science will find a solution and the arts will help us rebuild. We will laugh at shows, sing at concerts, and eat popcorn at the movies again. We will gather around our favorite paintings. And, we will most certainly come together to celebrate all that this beautiful world has to offer. ■



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