Artists and arts groups reinvent themselves as the world shifts

by Ellen Fagg Weist

A musician performing on your sidewalk. Artists posting new works in their yards and radio DJs recording their shows at home, bird sounds included. Audiences and artists connected via computer screens.

This is the state of Utah arts in 2020.

This season, musicians, artists and nonprofit leaders embraced reinvention — the creative COVID-19 Pivot — as they faced the massive economic rupture caused by cancellations and closures that are expected to stretch into next year.

“We had to write a new playbook using the best information we had available at the time,” says Sheryl Gillian, executive director of the Holladay Arts Council. She was talking about restructuring a summer concert series, but she could have been talking about what it means to present art in a pandemic.

Some arts leaders say they’ve been reinspired to shift programming that better serves their nonprofit mission. Others are recharging by reaching audiences beyond their physical walls. Yet even as we take the pulse of Utah’s creative community, the stories of local artists are still being written. Says Jeff Whiteley, founder of the Excellence in the Community nonprofit mission. “The best thing you gave our family,” his loved ones told the singer. “I’m busier now than I was before COVID,” says Boyé, adding that his attitude toward music has changed. Now he thinks of performing as a service for first responders and neighbors, and that approach is boosting his own mental health.

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In one day in mid-March, as the economy quickly closed down, singer Alex Boyé learned just as quickly his upcoming concerts had been canceled. The cancellations added up to more than $100,000 in income.

Boyé, who lives in Sandy, invites nominations of individuals, families or essential workers for intimate concerts. “It’s something people don’t even realize they need until they get it,” he says. He brings a portable sound system and performs a short concert 6 feet away from a small audience, singing motivational, Africanized pop songs, including his popular YouTube hit “Lemonade.”

By early September, Boyé had performed 50 quarantine concerts in nontraditional Utah and Idaho venues, including more than a dozen hospitals and nursing homes, as well as fire and police stations.

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The British-American singer’s answer: “You’ve got to take a lot of deep breaths.”

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Union County artist Jay Mikkelsen recently took his 2011 Utah Museum of Contemporary Arts (UMOCA) installation organized by UMOCA guest curator Micol Hebron.)

Jorgenson says the drive-yourself-by exhibit drew different viewers than those who attend shows at the contemporary art center.
By the third restoration — or was it the fourth? or fifth? — of a summer concert series in the COVID-19 era, the Holladay Arts Council decided to keep plans as simple, and as safe, as possible.

The group planned four “UnCommon drive-in style concerts. Can served as portable social distancing bubbles, as plans have to change based on Salt Lake County’s fluctuating risk status, says Sheryll Gillilan, executive director.

Since Holladay City Hall isn’t equipped with a theater sound system, the arts council sought a suitably sized parking lot, which was harder to find than it sounded. Eventually, a local Latter-day Saint church was harder to find than it sounded.

Concertgoers reserved staggered parking spaces online, with the crowd capped at 100 demand was high in a season when most summer events were canceled. In addition, the concerts were live-streamed so more people could enjoy the music in their air-conditioned living rooms.

All of the plans and the resuming of plans have caused the arts council to reflect on its mission of bringing together the community through art. And like its colleagues across the state, Gillilan says the council is embracing the challenge of creative problem-solving.

“Incubation Period:”

granaryarts.org/

“Lawn Gnomes 2020” by emailing Ephraim, Spring City, Fairview and Mt. online. Artworks will remain posted in all going through similar experiences,” Jorgensen says. “When else has this happened?”

It’s fascinating how we’re shutdown of regular work and school routines, landscape of the body, amplified by the world, while others explored the emotional

Some pieces invoked nature as a dream as a “creative incubation period.”

By 40 artists from around the world, inviting digital exhibit created by PARC Collective, is the center’s recent “Incubation Period”

upcoming events: holladaysarts.org

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"YOU COULD HEAR THE BIRDS IN THE BACKGROUND, AND YOU COULD HEAR THE MUSIC, AND IT WAS A REALLY, REALLY AWESOME THING."

Film students graduating into a pandemic will face the most difficult job market in years, while many screenings of their works were canceled due to COVID-19, says Miriam Albert-Sobrino, an assistant professor in film and media arts at the University of Utah.

That's why she and senia Albert-Sobrino, her filmmaking and U. teaching colleague — and twin sister — launched an online festival to showcase student work. The Albert-Sobrinos, who were raised in Spain, left careers as nurses in 2007 to earn film production degrees. They make films under their also sisters label.

In July, they transitioned a 4-year-old university-based festival, canceled due to the pandemic, into a digital event, Alone Together Fest. They have ambitious plans to build the site into an international platform and resource for student filmmakers.

They hope the initiative will help students find their first film jobs. Rather than cash awards, Alone Together prizes were designed as a chance for student filmmakers to receive feedback and be mentored by professionals.

Next year the sisters plan to expand the online festival to include IQAs and video panels to connect filmmakers, professionals and the audience. “It was born out of the pandemic as a reaction to that, but we want it to continue for years to come,” Albert-Sobrino says.

With support from the university and the Utah Film Commission, the sisters donated their resources to build the festival’s website. It’s part of their effort to boost the reputation of the U’s film program.

“Merl’s Magical Sandwiches”

Film still from Nathan Rice’s animated short, “Merl’s Magical Sandwiches.”

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UtahPresents

When UtahPresents shows were canceled in the spring, Executive Director Brooke Horejsi seized the opportunity. If an audience couldn’t be invited to Kingsbury Hall, she asked, could the space be used to help artists create new work?

She invited arts companies to consider campus residencies. First up was Kinetic Light, a disability arts company “with physically fearless performers,” as Horejsi describes their work. The group is creating “Barbed Wire,” a dramatic piece of spectacle theater, featuring innovative rigging to fly wheelchair-based performers.

Kingsbury seemed like a safe place for the company to isolate and work together for six weeks. UtahPresents hoped to eventually present the piece virtually in order to remove the barriers for disabled arts patrons to see the work. Yet in late June, when virus cases in Salt Lake City spiked, there weren’t enough tests available locally to maintain the company’s safety, so the residency was postponed.

In August, Beatrice Thomas, a Bay Area artist who performs in drag as Black Benatar, returned to Utah to develop her “fiesty and subversive” Black Magic Cabaret. The show is scheduled to be performed at Kingsbury next April, and it will feature local queer performers.

“We’ll create a safety pod for them,” is how Horejsi described the residency, adding that they would work with local artists virtually.

“The queer community has been existing in a virtual space, as their own safe space, for a long time,” she says. “For (Thomas), and her queer community, the internet and virtual space was the original safe space.”

Investing in new models that support artists developing work is one of the opportunities presented by this cultural pause, Horejsi says. Free virtual content might have served as an artistic balm during the early days of the pandemic, but it isn’t sustainable. “The average person doesn’t understand how precarious the field has always been — it’s the original gig economy.” Artists have been living that way for a very long time, and they are suffering dramatically.”

UtahPresents changed its season announcement event, featuring the LajaMartin Dance Company into a virtual fundraiser. Originally they hoped to host 200 people in the theater but the online event attracted almost 900 pageviews over several months, while hitting fundraising goals.

“It costs money to make work, particularly work that’s worth watching,” Horejsi says. “Even if audiences are watching in their PJs in their living room, we want them to have an experience that makes them feel as if it’s worth their time.”

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Most exhibitions at St. George’s Sears Art Museum are months in the planning, with artworks that are meticulously hung and arranged.

But instead immediacy was the inspiration for “COVID-19 Pops-Up in Art,” an exhibition on the museum’s foyer, says Kathy Candel биз, museum curator. Anchoring the show were artist Stewart Seidman’s series of eight large acrylic paintings about the death of his sister from the virus. “Very poignant,” she says. “It’s an immediate, first-person artist response to right now, not looking back on it.”

To accompany those searing paintings, she invited local artists to create 12-by-12-inch works about the coronavirus. Artists became part of the exhibit as they were invited to come to the museum separately to hang their own work. Poems by local writers accompany the artworks. The curator also created an installation from vintage chairs arranged in taped-off squares, with signs like “Wash your hands” and “Closed economy: We’re in it together.”

“I had to shift gears immediately and make all of this work really fast,” Candel биз says. “I wanted artists’ reactions to what was going in their lives during COVID-19. That’s what we got.”

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