Peek behind the scenes as some Seattle performing arts groups prepare for fall 2021 — their first in-person shows in over a year

Sep. 13, 2021 at 6:00 am
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At the beginning of the pandemic, Rachel Cook, artistic director of the contemporary theater On the Boards, couldn’t think past the next few weeks.

“I was either postponing or canceling things,” Cook said.

Now for the first time since the pandemic began, she gets to look forward, as On the Boards opens its doors to live audiences with a theater festival starting Sept. 14, joining other performing-arts groups welcoming in-person audiences this fall. After months of canceling shows and concocting online and outdoor performances, finally, Seattle-area actors and dancers are rehearsing on stages again, designers are dusting off costumes, and technicians are wiring up the mics.

Even so, artists and arts organizations are proceeding cautiously. The rising number of COVID-19 cases due to the delta variant is a looming threat over the fall season. And many arts groups are proceeding with smaller staffs and budgets than they had before. After layoffs and over a year of unemployment, some artists and technicians have moved on to other fields. Last year’s canceled shows meant lost income from ticket sales and venues predict much smaller audiences this year, so most are operating with smaller budgets.

But after the past year, in which they’ve also fine-tuned coronavirus safety protocols, they’re feeling confident to take on the challenge of putting on shows safely amid the continuing pandemic.

“We have to learn to live with this. We have to continue to prioritize people’s safety and learn to live within this multiyear situation,” while continuing to move forward, said Ellen Walker, executive director of Pacific Northwest Ballet, which returns to in-person performances Sept. 24.

That means limited audiences, socially distanced seating, masked rehearsals, vaccine requirements, new HVAC systems. For some organizations, it could also mean taking a
hit on ticket sales, offering streaming options alongside live performances, and smaller casts and crews.

And even if live performances are banned again, after the past year spent mastering the art of MacGyvering online, outdoor and even some telephone performances, performing artists feel prepared to take on those challenges — if they have to.

The performing arts have emerged from the last year changed and hopeful. Many even believe they can turn the challenges and losses of the past year into meaningful change for the industry.

“You can’t erase the fact that [the pandemic] happened and I don’t think it’s going to go away,” Cook said. “I don’t think we’re going to go back to what it was before. Just like the virus, we are going to mutate into new strains.”

And artists are adapting, each in their own way.

While some industries have been able to turn on the lights and throw open their doors after shutdown restrictions lifted, it takes weeks or even months of creative work, technical work, rehearsals and collaboration to bring a story to life on stage.

Here, three artists (a playwright, a costumes and hair-and-makeup director, and a dancer) take us behind the scenes to show the extraordinary resilience it takes to bring stages back to life in these extraordinary times.

**Dressing up “La Bohème”**

The sewing machines in the Seattle Opera costume shop hadn’t been touched in over a year.

The hair-and-make-up and costume departments have been merged and the staff cut down from six to four. Blue circles dot the vast costume shop floor to mark six feet of distance, and everyone wears masks.

Last month, Liesl Alice Gatcheco, the director of costumes, hair and makeup, and her downsized staff walked through rows of sewing machines and shuffled through the racks of costumes in the bright spacious costume shop at the Opera Center.
They were in the “costume discovery” phase of preparing for the Opera’s fall production of “La Bohème,” which starts Oct. 16. On the racks were probably a hundred or more dresses and hats and accessories to examine and assign to each of the 41 cast members (down from the 99 cast members originally planned in 2020).

Seattle Opera wasn’t completely dormant during the past year. They produced digital content as did many other local performing arts organizations, and the costume shop was right there with them. The digital performances tended to have smaller casts and were filmed in various locations.

Now as they return to live performances, the hair and makeup and costume department is readjusting to the scale of putting on live opera again.

“So many staff changes and protocols. It’s like we’re kind of reinventing the wheel as we go because of what happened, but we’re so fortunate that we’re working,” Gatcheco said. “We’re so fortunate that we’re able to do live shows.”
This year, the size of the chorus has been cut in half in order to adhere to COVID safety protocols, but with fewer designers on staff, that doesn’t mean less work.

“It was a super hard pivot when we changed to digital content but we did it, which is amazing,” Gatcheco said. “We continued our season. We went from a live theater company to a film company. It was pretty crazy. I’m glad that the logistics of that is gone, but now we have a different set of issues to deal with — bigger casts (again), which is great because that’s opera, big grand ol’ opera, but the social distancing, N95 mask wearing and all those protocols are still here, and we thought they were going to be gone.”

After Seattle Opera endured furloughs and layoffs, with over 30 staffers being permanently laid off, Gatcheco is grateful that her dual background in costume and hair and makeup made her a solid choice to take over as director of the merged departments. But she’s also eager to make changes.
Standing in front of the elaborate costumes she will help transform for the leads in this year’s “La Bohème,” Gatcheco shared her vision for a more inclusive opera that can begin right where she stood.

She imagines a costume shop where wig masters work with actors of all different hair types to create wigs that work for them without compromising their hair. One where costume designers are competent in working with all body types, where makeup artists consider the nuances of darker skin complexions and refuse to comply with the racist yellowface demands often used in operas like “Madame Butterfly.” She also plans to expand the costume rental program to allow smaller theaters and organizations to rent Seattle Opera costumes for their productions.

“We have the opportunity to deal with people of all shapes and sizes,” Gatcheco said as she reminisced about a full-figured actor who cried when Gatcheco designed a dress that flattered her body type.
Moments like that are why Gatcheco accepted the job in the first place. Even as the arts are hurting and the delta variant threatens to keep the struggle going, Gatcheco is hopeful about some of the opportunities that have come out of this dark time.

When Gatcheco was hired as a stitcher 18 years ago, she was one of the only people of color at production meetings. Now, she runs a department of predominantly women of color.

The demographic shifts and cuts to the department may have occurred during the crucible of the pandemic, but Gatcheco is determined to turn it into a positive.

“We don’t come from costume establishment per se, we offer a new perspective,” she said. “Our philosophy being the new kids in here is taking the opportunity, in the decisions we do get to make, to celebrate who people are and not pushing who they should be on stage.”

**Creating a musical**

It wasn’t glamorous. Under fluorescent lights in the basement of West Seattle theater ArtsWest, three theater artists gathered around a table speckled with half-empty coffee cups, stacks of paper, busy laptops and a package of Oreos. There were call sheets and documents about Filipino mythology taped to the walls and notes on whiteboards around the room.

It wasn’t glamorous, but it was magical. It was something that hadn’t happened in 18 months.

Together, playwright Justin Huertas, theater artist and singer Rheanna Atendido, and ArtsWest artistic director Mat Wright were crafting a musical, word by word, note by note ... for the first time since before the pandemic.
Playwright Justin Huertas and theater artist and singer Rheanna Atendido work on Huertas’ new musical, “We’ve Battled Monsters Before,” debuting at ArtsWest in November. (Crystal Paul / The Seattle Times)

In a multiday workshop last month, the three of them came together to help turn drafts of songs and seeds of ideas from Huertas’ vision for a new original musical into “We’ve Battled Monsters Before,” the show that on Nov. 26 will launch ArtsWest’s first season since the pandemic forced the shutdown of in-person performances last March.

Though Huertas was fortunate enough to have work and commissions (including “We’ve Battled Monsters Before”) during the stay-at-home order last year, he said the time spent away from traditional theater allowed him to reflect. And with the police brutality protests taking center stage last summer, his reflections drew him to redefine his personal artist’s mission “to deconstruct and decolonize American mythology and center people who haven’t gotten the chance to be the heroes of the story.”

“Our having to be solitary for months and months and months have allowed for us to have the time and brainspace and compassion and empathy to recognize the systemic injustices and all the bullshit that’s been happening for years that some of us have had the privilege to be on the periphery of,” he said in an interview with The Seattle Times last year. “I want to decenter the straight white male hero and give us hero stories that center people who we haven’t seen before. That’s the kind of thing I grew up without.”

“We’ve Battled Monsters Before” is a chance to not only center stories about heritages that don’t usually show up on stage, but to also learn more about his own Filipino American heritage.

After the isolation, reflection and righteous anger of the past year and a half, Huertas knew that this was the story he wanted to use to mark the return of live theater
The musical is loosely based on the “Ibong Adarna,” a centuries-old Filipino folk tale about a magical bird that Huertas’ father used to tell him as a bedtime story. The musical is a chance to bring Filipino stories to the stage with Filipino actors actually playing Filipino characters.

“[Filipino actors] never play Filipino people but we play every other race. Right out of college I played three Mexican characters, someone from Puerto Rico, and two Chinese characters,” Huertas said. “It took awhile to understand that we are allowed to be ourselves and we are allowed to tell our own stories. Our stories are awesome.

“There’s Filipino history and dramaturgy on the walls, that’s never happened in a room I’ve ever been in. Ever,” he said.

“We’ve Battled Monsters Before” is more than just a revolutionary idea for Huertas; it’s ultimately a story about family — a family of secret monster-battling warriors, but a family no less. And that’s how the three theater artists operated together as they fine-tuned the play in the ArtsWest basement — like a family, or at least like old friends, taking on the arduous task with love.

Huertas strummed his guitar and nodded along as Atendido translated his written lyrics into an enchanting soprano. Wright worked fastidiously at his laptop, occasionally adding more papers to add to the stacks on the table, his tapping foot the only telltale sign that he was listening to the music.

Together, Huertas and Atendido interrogated the meanings of certain Tagalog phrases in the songs inspiring the musical. Occasionally, they stopped and sang a single word or syllable back and forth, over and over again to make sure it was exactly right — the right note, the right pitch, the right cadence. Then Huertas would note it down somewhere in the stack of papers in front of him and take up his strumming again.

In this intimate setting, the process was a gentle, if rigorous, one. Huertas was at ease with his guitar in his hands, sometimes studiously taking notes or so benevolently giving them that it’s difficult to see that it wasn’t everyone’s idea.

This creative process, Huertas said, is a joyful one and a unique one in his experience.

“In the past I’ve been treated like the work that I do is product-based and the process is less important as long as the product is something that will sell,” Huertas said. “Instead of getting a full draft of something that I don’t know what it is yet and tearing it apart, instead I get to bring in all these pieces and build something.
“I really hope that more rooms are like this when they come back.”

**Back at dance rehearsals**

In company class at Pacific Northwest Ballet, you can hear the breathing, like a gentle wave.

For professional dancers, daily class is a ritual: a quiet check-in with the body, an exploration of technique, a communal exercise in pushing one’s limits in dance. And after many months of Zoom classes and trying to do soaring jumps in apartment living rooms, company class at PNB is back. It’s a little different — the dancers are divided into two studios to ensure distancing, the studio piano is surrounded by an acrylic shield and everyone’s masked — but it’s back, a tiny, graceful step toward normality as the company approaches its upcoming season and its return to live performance.

At a portable barre near the far corner, corps de ballet member Kuu Sakuragi quietly stretched before class last month, wearing a surgical mask that didn’t quite hide a calmly contented expression. For him, company class is a place to be himself.

“It’s great,” he said later, of the way dancing allows him to let down his guard. “Once you’re doing that first combination in plié, it just kind of peels away that wall. And you’re OK with it, you’re like, I’m comfortable sharing myself. By the time you do grand allegro (a final series of soaring jumps), you’re completely naked. Very vulnerable.”

He cites a favorite quote from dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov: “Dance for me for one minute, and I’ll tell you who you are.”
For Sakuragi, a 23-year-old Bellevue native and graduate of PNB’s DanceChance Program and PNB School, the upcoming season is a long-delayed homecoming. After completing the Professional Division at PNB School in 2017, he had hoped that artistic director Peter Boal might offer him a company contract, but ended up taking a position with Alberta Ballet, spending three years there.

After re-auditioning for PNB several times on visits home, he was finally offered a PNB corps position in February 2020 — just in time for the pandemic to put an end to live performance. He didn’t dance for “five, six months” while furloughed, and then slowly made his way back into performance shape during the company’s digital season.

“It took me back to being a student — working really hard every day, the pain you go through, the mental struggle,” Sakuragi said.

Now he’s returned to a typical life for a professional dancer: class every morning, rehearsal every afternoon as the company prepares for a complicated hybrid season. PNB is presenting six repertories plus “The Nutcracker” from September through June. It’s the normal schedule, but with a twist: The first two reps are small-scale performances for subscribers only, to be presented to a socially distant audience. (PNB executive director Walker estimated that McCaw Hall will be no more than half full for those performances.)

As a new corps member, Sakuragi’s performance opportunities are uncertain (other than “Nutcracker,” which keeps everyone busy). For example, in “Ghost Variations,” the
Jessica Lang ballet that’s part of the November rep, he’s currently rehearsing one of the male solo roles as part of its third cast — but only two casts are scheduled to perform.

Still, injuries and schedule changes happen, so Sakuragi was in the studio on a recent late Tuesday afternoon, working with stager Kanji Segawa to learn the role. He stood behind principal dancers James Yoichi Moore and Kyle Davis, watching and mirroring them, repeating the movements as an actor repeats lines, memorizing them in his body. As the dance takes shape on the three men, something else emerges too: ballet’s long history of young dancers following in the footsteps, and learning from, those who came before.

Of the changes brought by the pandemic, he notes that masks have actually had a benefit, though he initially struggled to adjust to dancing masked.

“I think it’s more like an advantage, because the moment we take it off, we can breathe even more,” he said. “We’re like, whoa, this is easy.”
Whatever the new season may bring, Sakuragi is eager for it — to finally perform with the company where he’s spent much of his young life. “I’m not really expecting anything. I just want to be on stage,” he said. “I want to put myself out there and know that I worked really hard. I definitely miss everything about performing ... the nervousness, the showing off ... ” His voice trails off, and he grins. “Yeah.”

As company class nears its end, artistic director Peter Boal sets a grand allegro combination, telling the dancers they can use the final four counts to do whatever they want.

When his turn comes, Sakuragi flies across the floor, tossing in at the end a soaring grand jete with one leg elegantly bent; a movement that exudes joy — and, somehow, hope.

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