Precedent for an Unprecedented Situation

Byron Harrison

As venues across Europe, the UK, and North America were announcing closures due to the COVID-19 outbreak during the second week of March, the anxiety within the performing arts community was real and justified. The potential magnitude of impact on the arts sector, from my perspective living in Hong Kong, had already become apparent, however, as venues here had been closed for over six weeks. Even as a newcomer to this city, I could observe (and benefit from) the collective experience and lessons of SARS in 2003. And so, I began to bristle at words like "unprecedented" and phrases like "uncharted territory." A refusal to look across cultural lines and to deny guidance from history would only allow us to repeat mistakes.

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"On Thursday, the governor ordered Broadway's theatres – which played through war and the 1918 Spanish flu – to close down as he forbade gatherings of more than 500 people.

from *New York City to close America's biggest school system*, by Joshua Chaffin, Financial Times, 17 March 2020

I began to enquire into the effects and lessons learned from the so-called "Spanish" flu which ravaged the world between 1918 and 1920. Broadway theatres not shutting down in 1918 was being used to scale the response to COVID-19, often ignoring the nationwide and international response. Public entertainment was widely closed in London and elsewhere in the UK. Blanket closure of venues occurred in almost every city in the US.

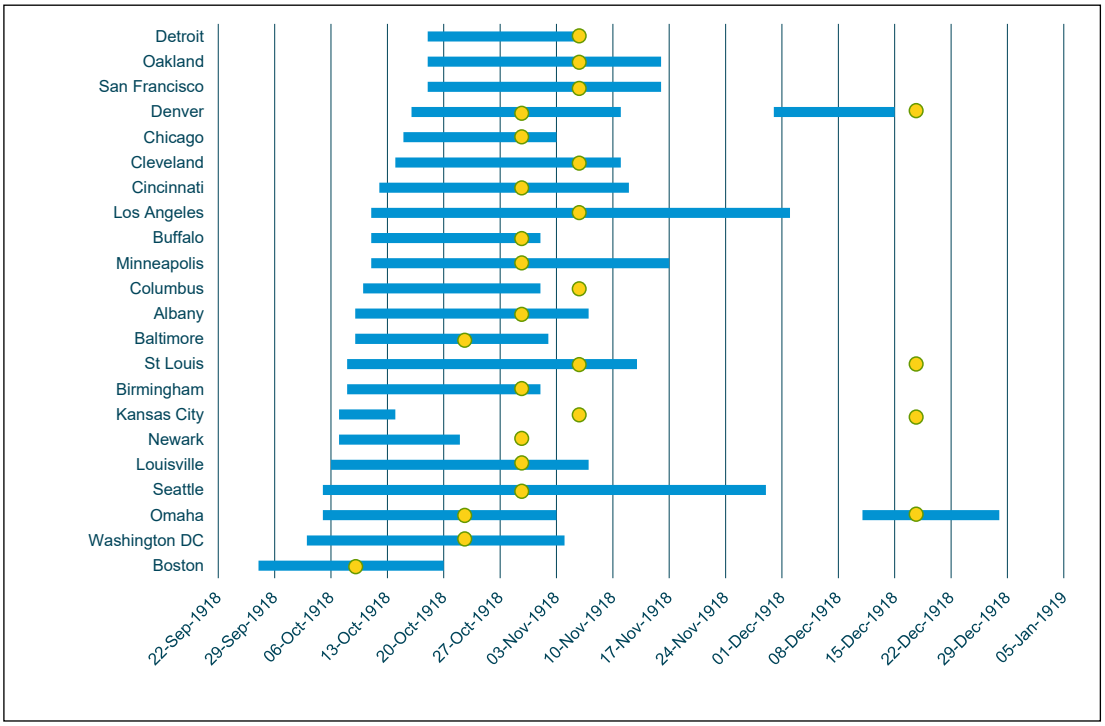
As an American, I was tuned to some excellent research and journalism on history of decisive (and sometimes greatly differing) responses from cities across the country, notably the slow response in Philadelphia and its disastrous effects, and the comparatively quick response in St Louis.

"The present calamity of the influenza plague which inspired the authorities to this action calls for drastic treatment, and through we regret exceedingly the deprivation which this suspension inflicts upon so many working under us, there is only cheerful compliance with orders to be considered.

"We adhere to our belief expressed to the officials of the Board of Health that the theatre is the least harmful of all places of gathering, and claim that the providing of amusements for the people would appear to be most necessary in these threatening times that portend panicky conditions.

From a joint statement by the Association of Theatre Managers of Boston and Motion Picture Exhibitors of Massachusetts, 26 September 1918.

With less understanding of the science of infectious disease than we have now, governments in 1918 arrived at generally the same policy prescriptions as those today: reducing crowding and modifying personal



1918 US Theatre Closures
Courtesy of Charcoalblue

hygiene to slow the spread and limit the number of people infected. Most theatres in the US were shut down for longer than three weeks, with some cities, especially in the West, enduring six- or seven-week closures. Generally, theatres reopened about ten days after the number of deaths peaked.

Multiple waves of the virus were experienced, with the second often being worse than the first. Omaha closed its theatres a second time after reopening for five weeks; Denver's theatres were open for three weeks before shuttering again.

Following the reopening of theatres, there was increased scrutiny of the health-worthiness of places for entertainment. In such Western cities as Fresno and Sacramento, patrons of motion picture houses were required to wear masks. Boards of health stepped up theatre inspections and enforcement of ventilation ordinances. Inspectors in Chicago, for instance, ordered some theatres to close because of non-compliance.

Public health was on the mind of the theatregoing public and, in advertisements, theatres began to boast about ventilation. Some statements were surprisingly detailed, such as this for the Vista Theatre in Chicago: "The air enters this theatre through 280 inlets and the entire atmosphere is completely changed every three minutes. The air passes through a 3" sheet of odourless disinfected water and by means of a 20HP motor is forced into the auditorium."

We can draw some guidance for today from the theatre industry of the 1918 flu era:

- Theatres should be prepared for a second wave of infections and even a second wave of closures, pending the success of antiviral treatments and a vaccine.
- Changes to codes and standards for ventilation and other safeguards of public health may result.
- Communication with the public will be required to provide assurances about the safety of venues.
- Sustained theatre closures and health concerns may contribute to labour-relations issues.

While some short-term changes were implemented, there is little evidence that theatre-going shortly after 1918 looked much different than it did before the flu outbreak. Perhaps the only codified changes were more stringent ventilation standards. There was a general heightened awareness of safety in public buildings at the time. We cannot attribute all improvements in assembly buildings of that time period as reactions to the flu. The 1918 flu was, after all, just 15 years after the famous Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago in which over 600 people died.

Lessons from SARS

The SARS outbreak of 2003 caused an economic recession in Hong Kong, already dealing with righting itself in post-handover period. SARS has had lasting social and cultural effects and entrenched a culture of personal responsibility over a mistrust of government. SARS led to nearly 300 deaths in Hong Kong; at the time of writing COVID-19 is attributable to 4 deaths in Hong Kong. The transmission of SARS is understood to have been more transmissible through aerosol and small droplets therefore more communicable with casual proximity than is understood for COVID-19.

Even given the seriousness of the outbreak and the highly contagious characteristics of the virus, far more public events continued through the SARS period than are happening now. The Rugby Sevens tournament was played with spectators. Many performances were cancelled, but those were mainly attributed to limited international travel. Following the March to April 2003 outbreak, a government-sponsored international arts festival continued as planned in mid-July with only a few groups withdrawing.

Changes to public health policy were, indeed, hastened by SARS, including contact tracing, school closures, and temperature checking which have informed the current response. While SARS has clearly influenced a culture of mask wearing, disinfecting commonly touched surfaces, and public toilet hygiene, there were no lasting changes to operations or practice in performance venues. Toronto, another city significantly affected by SARS, saw the production of *Mamma Mia!* cancelled, but this was the exception, not the rule.

During COVID-19, Hong Kong was quick to respond, but has never undertaken a full "lockdown." Museums, sport facilities, performance venues, and bars have been closed since late January. Some facilities had begun phased reopening in March but were quickly shut when a second wave of infections hit. At the time of writing, with only three infections in the last week, museums and some sport facilities are about to reopen.

The additional context of SARS suggests some additional guidance:

Sydney Theatre Company Wharf Renewal Project. Artist's impression of the two adjacent flexible theatres joined together, as designed by HASSEL and Charcoalblue. Image by Doug & Wolf.

- There will be an enduring and heightened sensitivity to public health.
- Preparedness for early action on future health events will help to sustain the industry through potential "second wave" events or future epidemics.

Timing

The biggest question we all want answered is "when?" When will we return to our seats, our dressing rooms, prompt desks, fly floors? The initial answers are that it's going to be a while, for most of us. Paddy Hocken, London-based freelance production manager, explains: "I have one tour booked (from before COVID-19) still holding out to do their shows at the very end of autumn, everything else has been cancelled, postponed or re-scheduled."

There is, however, a concern about the presumed autumn timeline, as the UK industry prepares for panto season. Pantos are "a fairly safe bet in terms of popularity, meaning most venues won't be available to tours from late November until January," states Simon Byford, Brighton-based production and event manager and consultant. "If [a plan for opening in] September slips to October, it suddenly becomes uneconomical to capitalise a tour knowing there will be a long hiatus. I think in reality this will push into 2021."

The other condition affecting the timing of reopening, is the perception of not going ahead too soon. Mike Schleifer, General Manager, of the Alliance Theatre, reports that in Atlanta there are plans for a consortium of "like-minded organisations to open at the same time."

Planning Ahead

Many organisations with public support are partnering with government to establish reopening timings and expectations. In the meantime, very little information is forthcoming. Smaller companies which are looking to those larger groups for assurances aren't yet getting any signs.

Only the largest commercial producers will make their own timelines, and they will, likely, be the first to return. There are some positive signs; set constructors are beginning to receive orders, while some long-running commercial productions have been able to keep casts employed running lines during the lockdown.

Uncertainties around travel are influencing production planning substantially, as appears to be the case in Australia, where travel restrictions are expected to last for some time. A spokesperson for the Arts Centre, Melborne, offered: "Amongst our presenter stakeholders, there is optimism for presenting works, largely now focussed on local productions, from October 2020. A focus is remounting works that can be done easily and quickly with lower risk."

Codes and Standards

The developments in public health following

1918 suggest that changes to codes and standards for ventilation and other safeguards may result. The theatre industry and specialist building designers should be at the forefront of this effort to ensure that any new guidance is relevant and doesn't threaten the viability of buildings and operations.

At Harvard University, the American Repertory Theatre and T.H. Chan School of Public Health have partnered together for a "Roadmap to Recovery and Resilience in Theatre" specifically addressing health issues in buildings. Charcoalblue and Haworth Tompkins, architects, are advising.

Communicating with the Public

There have already been opinion polls regarding the confidence of theatre-goers to return to venues and the results are sobering. The public relations efforts to assure audiences needs to begin now.

Planning for this disruption to the normal flow of audiences should be contemplated. Many venues are only marginally equipped for queuing for security checks and bag searches. Revised procedures for ticketing could also limit physical transactions, especially cash-based ones.

Food and beverage are critical revenue streams for many venues and will also face change. Potentially, pre-ordering for intervals will become compulsory. Single-serve options and disposable utensils may be perceived to be safer, contrary to environmental goals. Front-of-house facilities may also require substantial considerations, including using more easily cleaned surfaces, designing doorless entries and exits to washrooms, and expanding the use of touchless sanitary fittings. Given the importance of handwashing, the debate over paper towels versus hand dryers, while incorporating environmental concerns, is likely to return.

Digital Concert Hall Courtesy of Berliner Philharmoniker

Protecting artists

Returning shows to the stage without making compromises on safety is a preoccupation for many. Jono Perry, former Technical Director and current Wharf Renewal Project Manager at Sydney Theatre Company suggests: "Rehearsing and technical rehearsals will be the hardest thing to manage, with extended time spent in close proximity to others, and particularly for shows with interaction and intimacy required in blocking and precision in sequencing of scene changes."

The threat this poses for dance is explained by Australian technical director, Jon Buswell, "It might be easier for other disciplines of theatre but for us working in dance … we can't stop dancers sweating or touching each other."

Protecting back-of-house teams will be as important as protecting audiences. Those working in costume and make-up will face the same risks as professions working in close physical proximity with others. Dressing areas may need to quickly adopt social distancing practices, including de-densifying rooms.

These concerns extend to technicians as well. Simon Byford explains, "with some relevant PPE and very careful coordination it might be deemed possible to get back to working. That said our industry generally means working physically close with one's colleagues… these things cannot be done with 2m distancing."

Using digital for resilience

During the brief period between restrictions on public assembly and full lockdown, orchestras and theatre companies began streaming live performances. Organisations that had already invested in digital technology found a straightforward path to their existing audience members and gaining new ones. After weeks of lockdown, the Berlin Philharmonic, using their "Digital Concert Hall" platform have now broadcast a socially distanced ensemble performing in their hall without an audience. An audience survey conducted by Scottish Opera has revealed "overwhelming preference" for a return to live performances over streamed productions as soon as it is safe to do so, reports Alex Reedijk, General Director. While there is conjecture about the demand for digital content after audiences return and about how digital delivery may be monetised, we can say, definitively, that digital infrastructure will allow organisations to be resilient to future threats.

Capital expenditure

Organisations have only been able to achieve limited capital improvements, despite venues being closed. The Arts Centre, Melbourne explains their approach: "While a few individual activities were possible, such as recarpeting some very-high traffic foyers, this work soon stopped when the need to reduce non-essential costs became apparent. We placed a strong focus on people and maintaining engagement with as many team members as possible focusing our priorities on people rather than maintenance." In many locations there were only a few days between venues being closed to the public and "stay-at-home" orders being issued. After that point, any activity other than essential maintenance and security became difficult or simply unlawful.

There are potential long-term silver linings specifically for organisations owning and operating performance buildings. Lower construction prices in a recessionary environment will be a benefit for arts organisations looking to refresh, renovate or expand. However, only organisations that are advanced enough in the design process will be able to take advantage of that dip.

Production schedules

Director of Production at Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Tom Pearl, offers a view of what might be a streamlined and perhaps shorter production schedule. "[COVID-19] has pointed out to me … just how rigid our producing model is. We have almost no ability to pivot in the face of a pause in the process… There was little we could do other than cancel productions when this occurred." Tom says that Steppenwolf is working to "make our planning more flexible and establish more milestones that help us better understand when resources have to be committed so we can manage risk as conditions change."

Lloyd Thomas, London-based freelance production manager, has a vision for improvements to the process of realising a production. "Commercial theatre is a fast-paced environment. However, short lead times and decisions made in haste with insufficient consideration make for a wasteful process in terms of human resource, physical resource, the environment and money. I hope that this hiatus may encourage us all to consider the benefits that could be reaped through increased lead times, wherever possible."

Taking our metaphorical foot off the accelerator during COVID-19 has exposed another weakness in practice – the human cost. "We were all starting to think that the scale of what we were doing was getting a little bit too intense and demanding," confesses Paul Handley of the National Theatre. He asks: "Can we create something more sustainable in terms of welfare out the other side of this situation?"

As COVID-19 lockdowns began, the concrete frame was being completed for a new 400-seat theatre for Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. The Company, with their design team and advisors, initiated a forum for any infrastructure enhancements for future audience and performer safety that could be still be incorporated in the construction. Photo by Tom Pearl.

Concluding thoughts

While performing arts organisations face huge challenges from the COVID-19 crisis, demand for meaningful cultural engagement shows no sign of diminishing and, in fact, may be enhanced as a result of the pandemic. While it may be difficult to accept from the throes of damage control, history suggests that the performing arts will be resilient. Reassuring audiences of their safety is not going to be an easy process, however people will be hungry for culture and engagement once lockdowns and self-isolation end.