

When Bay Area performing arts reopen, will audiences be lined up outside?

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Lily Janiak and Joshua Kosman April 14, 2021 Updated: April 15, 2021, 7:09 pm



Krystyna Finlayson shows off the theater tickets she has kept on March 31, 2020, in Walnut Creek. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

In normal times, Walnut Creek theater patron Krystyna Finlayson sees 10 to 15 plays a month. So when playhouses reopen after being dark for more than a year, she vows to be there.

“I want to go back today,” she says. “I want to go back *yesterday*.”

Vivien Sin of San Francisco is more cautious. Before the pandemic, she saw approximately one play per month. If a theater opened its doors to her right now, she says, “I would ask a bunch of questions: How big is the crowd? Would we be seated in a socially distanced way?

“It’s a risk management thing.”

Gov. Gavin Newsom’s April 6 announcement that the state expects to fully reopen the economy — including the arts and entertainment sector — by June 15 gave arts presenters a key piece of information they need to start planning seasons, booking concerts and hiring staff again.

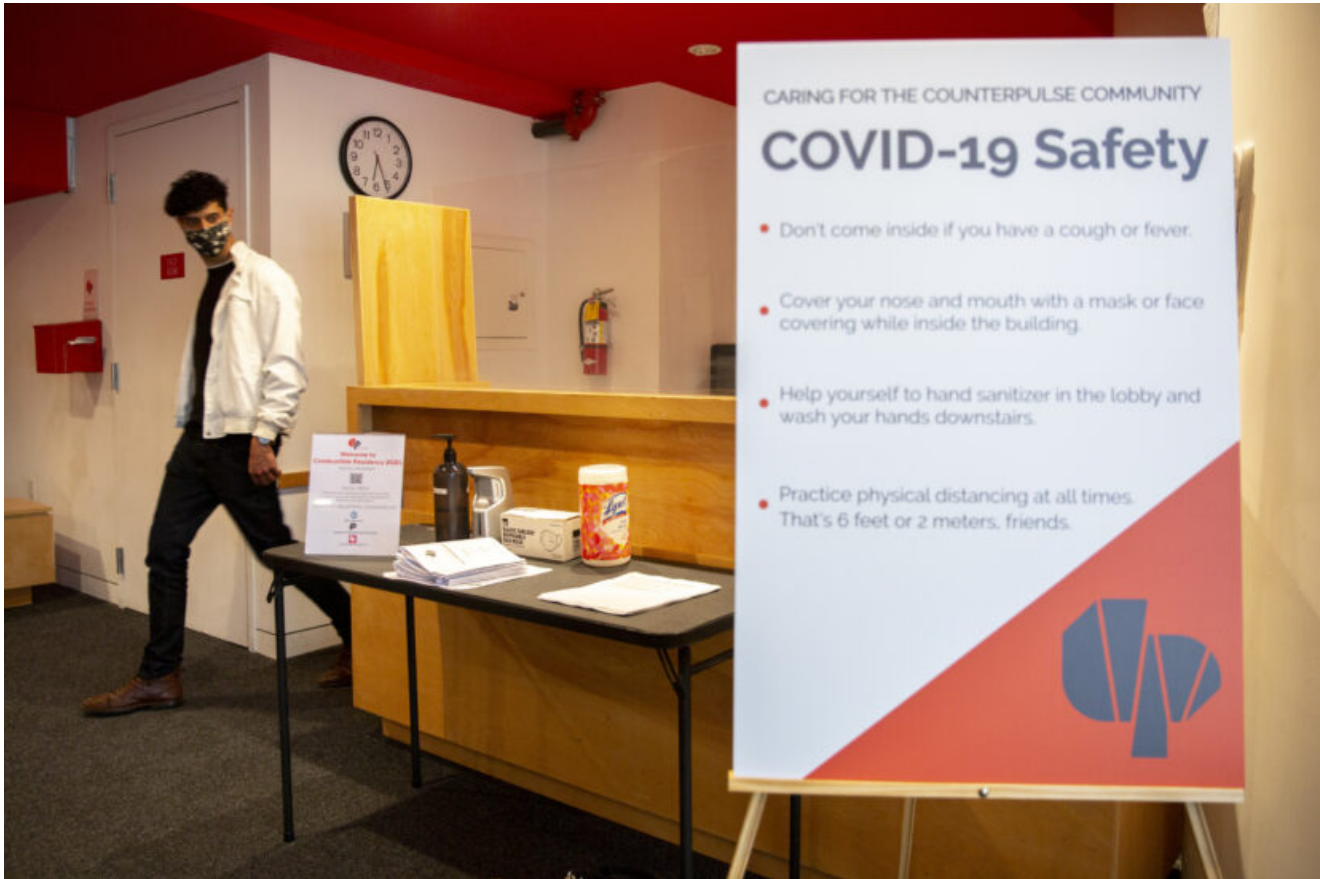
Two days later, when San Francisco Mayor London Breed announced that, starting Thursday, April 15, the city’s indoor venues can host in-person events again at limited capacity, it offered producers even further reason for hope.



“are:era” by Pseuda at CounterPulse in San Francisco. The show allows pods of up to four people at a time to view the installations in Combustible Residency 2021. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

But that still leaves the challenge of taking audiences’ emotional temperature on reentry. How rigorously will patrons expect to be protected from the dangers of the COVID-19 virus? Have entertainment habits atrophied during a hiatus of more than a year, or has the shutdown only made the hunger for the arts even keener?

These questions are confronting arts and entertainment producers of every genre and size, from hole-in-the-wall black box theaters to flagship institutions. They’re further complicated by the effects of other societal changes that have hit the Bay Area as a result of the pandemic, including changes in work habits and a possible population shift away from San Francisco.



Justin Ebrahemi at CounterPulse's front table, which is stocked with masks and wipes in preparation for Combustible Residency 2021. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Sometimes, even audiences themselves may not know what they want.

In May, West Edge Opera is scheduled to take a first step back to live, in-person performance with "Snapshot," its regular showcase of excerpts from new works in progress. The original plan was to offer patrons a choice between socially distanced seating at the outdoor Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda, and a recorded virtual stream of the program.

"Three months ago when I was talking to patrons, interest between the two was about 50-50," says general director Mark Streshinsky. "But as we got closer, there was much more interest in the live performance. People who'd said they weren't going to come in-person now said they would."

In the end, the company canceled the recording and added a second live performance.



“Human/ID” by the artist StratoFyzika at CounterPulse. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

In interviews with *The Chronicle*, one arts administrator after another testified — based on a combination of polling and sheer optimism — to their patrons’ eagerness to get back into the swing of attending cultural events in person.

“For someone now working from home on a permanent basis, the idea of coming to Davies Symphony Hall for a live performance as a communal experience will have more appeal than ever before,” said San Francisco Symphony CEO Mark C. Hanson. “Those people will have *more* interest, not less, in taking full advantage of the dining, cultural and entertainment opportunities in San Francisco.”

But returning to the old ways is going to require some acclimation, and many cultural institutions are resigned to waiting it out.

“Everyone I know is just so desperate to have those sweaty dance-party rock-‘n’-roll experiences,” says [Dan Strachota](#), talent buyer and managing partner at the [Rickshaw Stop](#), a small concert venue on Fell Street in San Francisco. “But I think we’re in for a rude awakening when people are still nervous about getting COVID, so they don’t go out.”



Dan Strachota, managing partner of Rickshaw Stop, poses for a portrait inside the San Francisco venue in 2020. Rickshaw Stop has been closed since mid-March of 2020. Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova / Special to The Chronicle

One question still to be answered involves the extent of population shifts prompted by the pandemic. Data from the U.S. Post Office shows a marked migration out of San Francisco to elsewhere in the Bay Area.

“Our administrative staff have been processing a record number of address changes in the past few months,” says Carma Zisman, executive director of the San Francisco dance company ODC. “Even for audience members who remain in the city, leaving a neighborhood can be enough to create a barrier for returning to the ODC campus,” whether because of transportation or just new daily habits.



A bicyclist rides along an empty Market Street toward as police officers from multiple agencies keep an eye on downtown when curfew takes hold in San Francisco on May 31, 2020. Mayor London Breed issued a curfew following several nights of violent protests and looting in the city. Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

As more companies let their employees work from home permanently, it's also possible that potential arts audiences might be more likely to decide to stay home at night even after the pandemic is over.

“The rhythm of coming into the city from Bay Area counties has been broken,” says San Francisco Opera General Director Matthew Shilvock, “and we cannot expect people to just pick up where they left off. The charge for us as arts organizations, and for the city as a whole, is to inspire people to come into the city.”

And population shifts can vary widely across age ranges, according to several arts administrators. At the San Francisco Ballet, for example, 40% of the patron base is in San Francisco, while the rest reside throughout the greater Bay Area. But out of those San Francisco audiences, more than half are 65 and older, and “we’re pretty sure they’re staying put.”



Safiya Fredericks performs with Nassim Soleimanpour (onscreen) during “Nassim” at Magic Theatre in San Francisco. Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle 2019

At the Magic Theatre at the Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, Managing Director Kevin Nelson sees a similar dynamic. He estimates that 70% of the company’s audiences are of retirement age, and thus unlikely to be affected by a work-from-home mandate.

History offers some possible parallels, beginning with the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. After a brief but deadly two-month outbreak (the first of two waves to beset San Francisco) the city’s three biggest theaters — the Orpheum, Curran and Alcazar — all sold out on their reopening nights.

More recently, after 9/11, Broadway rebounded the following season, according to Martine Sainvil, director of communications at the Broadway League, which posts data on annual grosses and attendance.

“Both attendance and gross dropped for the 2001-02 season,” she says, but the next season was the highest-grossing to date. Local audiences returned first, she notes, cautioning that the comparison between then and now is very imperfect; Broadway reopened just two days after 9/11.

For our own time, the arts research firm WolfBrown, which has four offices across the country, including one in Oakland, has data showing that, of 425,258 arts audiences surveyed nationwide, 90% plan to go out at least as often as they did before COVID. Even before the

pandemic is over, 40% are ready to go out again, with or without the vaccine.

“That’s fantastic,” says Alan Brown, principal at the company. “But that’s also hypothetical because there ain’t nothing to go out to.”



“Human/ID” by the artist StratoFyzika at CounterPulse as part of the company’s Combustible Residency 2021. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Bay Area audiences are slightly more prudent, though, he notes, citing winter surges as a likely factor, among other causes for caution.

“Some people who might get vaccinated might be ready to go out right away, but others — their spouse might not be vaccinated; their friends who they normally go out with might not be vaccinated yet. There’s this lag in getting family members and friendship circles up to the same vaccination status,” he says. “Even then, people are going to be waiting and watching for infection rates to go very, very low. The resumption of demand is going to be gradual.”

Achieving herd immunity is vital, he adds. Without it, “we have outbreaks, clusters of outbreaks, rolling lockdowns, facilities open then closed again. I don’t think we can withstand another year of rolling cancellations and still hold the trust of audiences.”

But attitudes change. WolfBrown’s data depicts just one snapshot in time; its last Bay Area-specific report was published in November. And just because someone says they’re ready to attend a show doesn’t mean they would go if they were handed a ticket.



Greg Murphy working on tech and Berkeley Repertory Theatre Managing Director Susan Medak during Berkeley Rep's Ovation virtual gala. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle 2020

Looking at both the WolfBrown data and Berkeley Repertory Theatre's own surveys of its audiences, Managing Director Susan Medak says she can draw only limited conclusions.

One: "People who want to go to the theater are going to come back when they're vaccinated or when they think most other people are vaccinated."

Two: "They're willing to wear masks."

Three: "Safety remains a concern."

But she acknowledges that last one isn't even a real conclusion.

"That concept is such a mutable concept. We're all trying to guess what's in their heads when they say, 'Safety is a concern.' Nobody knows. Data as standalone information doesn't lead to wisdom," she says. "How do you turn data into wisdom?"

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