



David Walker,
Palm Beach
Opera general
director



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Palm Beach Opera reinvents its season.

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have doubled down on virtual content during the Covid era, but Palm Beach Opera is taking advantage of the year-round warm weather to convert its usual January-through-April season into a ten-day outdoor festival in February.

The festival will be held at the South Florida Fairgrounds's iTHINK Financial Amphitheatre. "We are in an ideal location to adapt outdoors," says PBO general director David Walker. "The facility also has a roof over 6,000 seats, of which we will not seat more than 2,500, more likely less. Finding something that was open and covered was vital." With the company's sixtieth-anniversary season approaching in 2022, Walker felt added pressure to maintain continuity, noting that without this solution, the company would have gone almost two years without live performances. "We're a seasonal company, so that's a long time to not have a presence."

When the company was forced to shut down last March on the verge of opening *Eugene Onegin*, the 2021 season had already been announced. Walker retained *La Bohème* and *Die Zauberflöte* from the original bill but swapped in *Pagliacci* for *The Pearl Fishers* in the interest of name recognition. Each opera will receive two semistaged concert performances.

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“This is different for our normal audiences to go to an outdoor venue, even though it does have a roof, when they’re used to a very nice arts center indoors,” Walker says, referring to the company’s regular home, the Kravis Performing Arts Center’s 2,200-seat Dreyfoos Hall. “We surveyed our audiences, and 80 percent of those who responded said they would be very comfortable attending outdoor performances in February. So I feel very confident that we’re going to get a good amount of our normal opera family. But

lemons into lemonade. He has been nursing the dream of a PBO festival since he started at the company six years ago.

“I loved performing at festivals, because you had the opportunity to watch other casts rehearse and perform, and you also had the opportunity to get to know more artists. It was more of a collaborative, supportive experience,” recalls Walker. Of the decision to try it now, he says, “It seemed so natural to me. It was like the universe was telling me, ‘You should be doing this. You’ve done this before,

“This is a unique, communal way for us to *band together.*”

I also know that we’re adapting some of our marketing and promotion planning to hit different demographics, as well as geographical areas, so we can excite and entice new operagoers as part of this really fun experience. We’re always up for this type of challenge.”

Safety, of course, is the company’s primary concern, and Walker is working closely with the theater to exceed required protocols. Precautions for the audience include mandatory masking, more than six feet of space between seats, fewer contact touch-points and longer intermissions to allow bathroom facilities to be sanitized after each use. Visiting artists will be housed individually and submit to regular testing. All rehearsals, including those involving the orchestra, will take place outdoors.

For Walker, who enjoyed a notable career as a counter-tenor before transitioning to arts administration in 2010, the opportunity to produce a festival with operas running in repertory, as opposed to a full season with one opera at a time, was more than simply turning

you loved this in your life,’ and I think the whole team resonated with that as well. This may be the only time we can do it at this particular company, in this town.”

Walker also sees an artistic benefit to semistaged concerts, especially with real-time camera capture on large side screens, as they are used at rock concerts. “You can do a lot without getting near each other—you can tell the whole story,” he says. “I often think that with big movement around big sets—while incredibly exciting—there’s something to the more still, focused experience. I think it draws people in more sometimes, makes them

iTHINK Financial Amphitheatre, PBO’s new venue



lean forward in their seats a little. It’s like an enhanced, really emotional recital.”

Even with the generous onstage real estate, the orchestra and chorus had to be slightly reduced to allow for appropriate distancing; the orchestra will be onstage, with the chorus behind and the soloists in front. But the forces are still sizable enough to guarantee a satisfyingly full opera experience.

“I think this is going to give people some hope and help heal our community through this crisis,” says Walker. “The power of music is transformative. This is a unique, communal way for us to band together and commit to making it happen in ways we never did before. It didn’t come easily—it took over three months to really work this out.”

In addition, PBO will unveil its long-planned Discovery Series—also outdoors, at the Old School Square in Delray Beach—with Bellini’s *Capuleti e i Montecchi* on March 21. The aim of the series is to introduce works outside the opera mainstream while showcasing the company’s resident artists. While Walker hopes circumstances will allow a return indoors for a full sixtieth season, he’s already considering ways to incorporate a festival element. For now, he is aware of how fortunate the company is to have outdoor options available this year.

“That’s something we should be able to take advantage of,” he says. “And I would suggest to every arts organization—what’s in your backyard? What can you do?” ■

Joanne Sydney Lessner is a singer, author and Drama Desk-nominated lyricist.