Full Experience.

Palm Beach Opera reinvents its season.

MOST ARTS ORGANIZATIONS 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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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 opera-goers 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 countertenor 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 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, 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 sixth 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?”

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