

## SERIES: BUILDING DIGITAL RESILIENCE AMONG ARTS & CULTURE NONPROFITS

### Article 2: Nonprofit Virtual Galas

#### - What they teach us about an increasingly digital future

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(Word Count: 1658)

According to a [report by Brookings](#), only four months into the pandemic, the fine and performing arts industries suffered estimated losses of 1.4 million jobs and \$42.5 billion in sales, which is 50% of all jobs in those industries and more than a quarter of all lost sales nationwide. Canceled tours and performances drove many performing arts nonprofits to digital initiatives like virtual galas to supplement lost revenues and to continue engaging with their communities. Encouragingly, these virtual events allowed some to report an expanded audience reach, increases in micro-donations, and access to gala revenues at a potentially lower cost.

Fast forward to June of 2021: Coronavirus restrictions were lifted; venues are opening; and, performing arts nonprofits are relieved and rushing to resume in-person gatherings. It is less clear now to what extent nonprofits will continue hosting virtual galas post-Pandemic. These virtual events do not typically raise the sums of money that in-person events can. While art lovers will view a performance and support a cause online, virtual galas do not satisfy attendee motivations for dressing up, socializing and networking. All this suggests that exiting The Pandemic, virtual galas may not experience the explosive and sector-wide growth we previously believed, especially given the stretched resources and dearth of digital skills in most organizations. It will prove challenging to host both virtual and in-person events if staff and volunteer fatigue remain at current levels, and if technology costs outpace new sources of revenues.

Still, there is much to be learned from virtual galas, one of several digital initiatives transforming the management and operations of arts and culture nonprofits today. Successful experimentation with them can help hone skills and build resilience for an increasingly digital future. Which virtual gala features should organizations keep and adopt for the “New Normal”? What are the implications for other digital initiatives better suited to your nonprofit? Based on research and interviews with performing arts executive directors, event planners and digital marketers, technology partners, and professors, this article presents 12 key lessons learned in the past year for the post-Pandemic era.

### Twelve Lessons Learned from Virtual Galas

1. **All digital initiatives, including virtual galas, should evolve from an explicit digital strategy.** Both digital and in-person strategies should address a nonprofit’s specific mission statements. (See Article #1 in this series by the same authors.) [American Ballet Theater’s \(ABT\)](#) mission to “preserve the classic repertoire of ballet and to extend the canon to the widest possible audience” led its management team to offer a free, pre-

recorded collaboration of film, music and new choreography on its YouTube channel for its 2020 gala, [ABT Together Tonight](#). Registrations and paywalls were initially avoided to maximize reach to new and global audiences. This proved successful when they recorded over 76,000 views in just 24 hours, well more than the 3,800 seats they typically had sold in previous in-person galas. A second virtual gala, [ABT Today](#), expanded audiences even more. ABT's attendees, at 300,000 annually, grew to 9.8M views of digital content in 2020, with attendees from outside the U.S. representing half.

2. **Devote energy to *selling* rather than *building* digital events.** This changes management's focus and hurdles away from implementing technologically sophisticated virtual events towards brainstorming creative ways to connect to the motivations and preferences of supporters and to grow the demographics of target audiences. [The Atlanta Opera](#) has created a new, digital media division for content creation and social media promotion led by a former CNN filmmaker. This digital transformation should allow them to scale operations and programming for future financial sustainability more effectively. For 2021, they chose not to devote energy and resources to a virtual gala with uncertain financial returns.
3. **Evolve from a *content presenter* to a *content producer* by curating archives, clearing rights, engaging audiences and supporters in real-time with website and social media content that encourages commentary by multiple voices including artists, staff, website & social media users.** This can create greater brand awareness and new revenue streams. In late 2020, [the Public Theater](#) produced a visual installation, *Say Their Names*, on its building facade which created conversation on the 2,100 black lives murdered at the hands of the police. Dedicated to creating a place of inclusion and a forum for ideas, this Public Theater initiative boldly addressed our society's ongoing social conflicts. [Capacity Interactive](#), a digital marketing consulting firm for the arts based in New York, helps its clients develop strategies for promoting and measuring the impact of digital content. Some of their clients are making this shift from presenter to producer. See more in upcoming articles by the same authors.
4. **Promote events in the mainstream media prior *and during* performance runs to create excitement, FOMO (fear of missing out), and maximum global attendance.** The Atlanta Opera attracted new audiences for both its limited, in-person performances and on-demand content after the [Wall Street Journal](#) reviewed its seasonal performances. Wilma Theater in Philadelphia received substantially more streaming views for its play, *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, on demand after a [New York Times](#) article.
5. **Gala format and complexity should be dictated by audience expectations and the nonprofit's budget and skill sets.** However, hosting a virtual gala on third party platforms rather than Zoom or YouTube can potentially raise more money. Third party platforms offer data analytics and metrics critical to corporate sponsors and major donors. They also incorporate advanced donation capabilities (on-line auctions,

thermometers, real-time ticker messaging, and QR codes for multiple screen events), interactive social and networking components, and pre-recorded and live segments. [ABT's Summer Celebration](#) in July 2021 will rely on a 3rd party platform, [Afterparty](#), to livestream its performance.

6. **Virtual galas should last for no more than 75 minutes to avoid attendees dropping from the event.** Digital attention spans and the preferences of younger audiences may suggest something useful for some in-person events, too. [The Atlanta Opera](#) began offering a shorter version of its classic performances during the Pandemic, attracting attendees, half of whom were entirely new to the organization.
7. **Invite previously unavailable keynote speakers and honorees who can easily record a remark or cameo to elevate the gala or event and boost audiences.** [The Public Theater](#) in New York routinely accesses talent via its board of directors and alumni network. In September 2020, [Forward Together](#) offered testimonials by artists such as Meryl Streep, Audra McDonald, and Alicia Keys who consider the theater as home.
8. **Consider a hybrid gala with both an in-person and virtual component that reaches a wider base of supporters.** Record the in-person gala and make it available online for on-demand viewing for as long as artistic rights allow for fundraising and brand-building. Charge a nominal fee, asking attendees to register their email addresses. Use emails to build membership lists and expand newsletter circulation, and to improve future engagement and fundraising. [La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club \(La MaMa\)](#) hosted a hybrid event in June 2021 celebrating Gay Pride. [LOVE Cabaret](#) was staged in their own ventilated theatre and live-streamed online, and broadcast on Vimeo.
9. **Provide bonus content to virtual events such as talk-backs with creatives and executives, and special digital programming for those who cannot attend in-person.** Consider charging nominal fees for these exclusive programs. [ABT's Summer Celebration](#) in July is free to registrants. However, sponsorship tables at price levels ranging from \$1,000 to \$100,000 are available, offering access to bonus content.
10. **Recruit creative talent with digital, production, broadcasting and distribution expertise and networks.** These innovative collaborations are critical for successful virtual galas and digital programming. La MaMa leverages its Cultural Ambassadors to gather content from like-minded theater companies globally. ABT commissioned an outside choreographer usually busy with Broadway productions to create new work for its dancers, quarantined in practice bubbles.
11. **Build community partnerships with others in the arts and culture ecosystem to create new content, build more brand awareness and ultimately, new financial support.** Post the content on social media and ask artists, staff, board members and corporate sponsors to repost for exponential growth. [Angel City Chorale](#) in Los Angeles

partnered with composer, Erik Wittiker, on Zoom to create their company's rendition of the anthem, [Sogno di Volare](#), securing continued growth on the heels of an ["America's Got Talent" win](#).

- 12. Build new ways of working together with diversity, equity and inclusion as a priority. Modify organizational structures to dismantle traditional silos between artists and staff.** Encourage staff to advance their digital storytelling capabilities. Support artists building a digital fan base and long-term professional relevancy. [Mosaic Theater Company](#) in D.C. created a collaborative four-person, season planning team and programming matrix in response to "[We See You, White American Theatre](#)," a BIPOC manifesto, of sorts, demanding change in theaters nationwide. The Public Theater initiated an [Anti-Racism and Cultural Transformation Plan](#) that included among many changes, the expansion of its senior artistic team so that all major producing decisions are considered in meetings where at least half the leadership are BIPOC.

**To conclude**, as executive directors and boards of directors of performing arts nonprofits guide their organizations towards the "New Normal", it's important to remember that hosting a virtual gala is a decision dictated by the organization's mission and strategic goals, its target audiences and internal resources. Virtual galas are a singular calendar event, just one initiative among many in a long-term digital and in-person strategy. However, virtual galas have proven to be a rich source of new information and learning as arts and culture nonprofits increasingly connect with audiences and supporters in cyberspace.

According to La Mama, "if there's a silver lining to 2020, which challenged every single performing arts nonprofit, is that it allowed us the opportunity to explore digital programming in a way that we couldn't before." Without the constant pressure to produce and perform, organizations hosted virtual galas and other digital events that might have taken two years to produce previously. Because of The Pandemic, arts and culture nonprofits are finding themselves more digitally resilient than they believed was possible.

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