

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

Recovering Together: Roanoke Arts Community Rallies to Survive Pandemic

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SPRING 2021

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Journalism
with honors in Journalism

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ABSTRACT

“Recovering Together” is a multimedia documentary that tells the story of how arts and cultural organizations in Roanoke, Virginia fought to remain viable during the Covid-19 pandemic. The narrative follows one non-profit, Southwest Virginia Ballet, in partnership with the local PBS station to deliver a digital production of “The Nutcracker”. It also examines the necessity for arts and culture in order to have a successful, thriving community, and shares the perspectives from those who work to ensure the arts remain possible and thriving in Roanoke. The written counterpart adds context to the visual story and provides more detail about the struggles that Roanoke arts leaders have faced during the pandemic. The multimedia piece can be found in full at: <https://www.thelionsroaratpsu.org/home/recovering-together-roanoke-arts-community-rallies-to-survive-pandemic/>

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Curt Chandler, my thesis supervisor, who supported me through a year of learning. His knowledge was vital to crafting this multimedia piece that captured the “feeling” of the Roanoke arts community, not just the facts. Thank you, also, to my honors advisor Juliet Pinto. Her critical eye helped whittle down this piece to only the most meaningful essentials. Together, their coaching and wisdom helped me strengthen my skills as a storyteller. Without their feedback, this piece wouldn’t fully capture how integral art is to the culture in Roanoke, Virginia.

Thank you to my parents who let me talk ceaselessly about what I was learning about documentary production and never doubted that I would finish this project. Thank you to my roommates who endured hours of Zoom interviews in our shared living space. And finally, thank you to the Roanoke arts community – especially the leadership at Southwest Virginia Ballet – who let me into your hearts and minds in a particularly challenging time.

Chapter 1

History

As the lights dim over the audience, hushed whispers fade into the familiar notes of “The Nutcracker’s” overture, the melody an indicator that the holiday season is here again. Little girls in satin dresses clutch their dolls and lean forward in their velour upholstered theater seats, mesmerized by the way the ballerinas float across the stage in their pointe shoes. The children’s feet dangle from their chairs, bouncing in time to the music. For 90 minutes they are transported. And for many, “The Nutcracker” is their first introduction to the arts.

The Southwest Virginia Ballet has welcomed patrons to its production of “The Nutcracker” on the second weekend of December each year for three decades. But because of the coronavirus pandemic, no tickets were sold for the holiday classic in 2020.

For months, the arts community in Roanoke, Virginia was weighed down by feelings of frustration and sadness. Theater directors shut their doors and furloughed their staff, and movie theaters were void of popcorn-munching patrons. As the seriousness of Covid-19 set in, so did panic for community arts leaders. How will their organizations – that are built around intimate human connection – survive?

City arts leaders who understand the value arts organizations bring to the community were willing to get creative to offer art in Roanoke. Douglas Jackson is the Arts and Culture Coordinator in Roanoke City. “The arts and humanities are critical in helping us understand who we are, how we live together, how we got to be here, and where we’re headed,” Jackson said. The heart of his work is the desire to make arts accessible to every member of the community regardless of their background. Once a month, he brings together the executive directors of nearly every arts organization in the Roanoke Valley to help further that mission.

Roanoke has a history of resilience. It is a historically working-class town in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It grew out of a crossroads of what would eventually become the Norfolk Southern Railroad, which drove the economy for more than 130 years. In 2015, Norfolk Southern left Roanoke taking nearly 2,000 jobs with it. As a result, the financial structure of the region was primed for change. The loss of the railroad made space for new economic engines.

Out of the opportunity for reinvention, the arts and culture sector grew stronger. Now, instead of traveling to Richmond, Washington D.C., or Charlotte, out-of-town visitors make the trip to Roanoke. A night at the ballet, the symphony, or the theater paired with a dinner and a hotel stay, brought money into Roanoke again.

According to a [report](#) in 2019, the nonprofit arts and culture sector generated \$64.2 million in total economic activity for the City of Roanoke; almost double the national median for regions of similar size. As “social distancing,” “masks required,” and “no public gatherings” became a part of everyday vocabulary, the work of nonprofit arts organization seemed almost unfeasible. In March 2020, Mill Mountain Theatre’s producing artistic director Ginger Poole had to furlough almost all of her full-time employees – a decision she did not take lightly – to protect the theatre’s cash reserves.

“I mean it sounds bizarre that you’re going to furlough somebody because you care about them, but it was to get these people into the unemployment system sooner than later,” Poole said. By September, she had not been able to rehire her production staff.

Southwest Virginia Ballet, whose annual revenue is driven by “Nutcracker” ticket sales, would do everything it could to perform. Led by executive director Carol Jessee and artistic director Pedro Szalay, the ballet began to explore alternatives to the traditional performance hall-style offering. The local PBS station, Blue Ridge PBS, saw an opportunity to offer tradition to a community who had felt the impacts of isolation, loneliness, and financial hardship brought on by the pandemic.

Southwest Virginia Ballet is a nonprofit company that provides free pre-professional ballet training to more than 50 students ages 10-18. The organization is dependent on its volunteers who serve

on the board of directors, make costumes, fundraise, and manage the company. The dancers rehearse on the weekends, sometimes up to nine hours a day. In a normal year, they would begin rehearsing the larger, corps de ballet, pieces of “The Nutcracker” in August. Over four months, the dancers would perfect their technique in preparation for the December debut. This year, to ensure the performance would be available on time, they recorded in October.

Chapter 2

Filming

In Southwest Virginia, October is marked by mild temperatures and golden leaves, collecting in heaps on the sidewalk. Southwest Virginia Ballet dancers march up the concrete steps of the service entrance of the Berglund Center. They are weighed down by book bags on one arm and ballet bags on the other – overflowing with makeup, bobby pins, and pointe shoes. The smell of hairspray lingers in the entryway. Each dancer, parent, and volunteer is temperature checked while filling out a Covid-19 symptom disclosure form.

But for many of them, coming to the theater to perform “The Nutcracker” is still routine. Some have been extras in the cast since they were seven years old. For others, this experience is new. Young party girls and gingerbread children buzz with excitement, bouncing up and down the fluorescent-lit hallways. For everyone, it will be a new experience to dance the ballet to an empty house.

Blue Ridge PBS brought its own production crew to film "The Nutcracker". They shot each piece out of sequence to minimize the interaction between the dancers. The team at PBS edited the ballet and prepared it for digital delivery in the weeks between October and December.

Chapter 3

Making It Work

Southwest Virginia Ballet is not the only organization that has pivoted to offer its craft to the community. Each Summer, Mill Mountain Theatre's company tours the region offering free performances at schools, boys and girls clubs, community centers, and the like as part of its education outreach mission. They strive to bring art to the people in Roanoke who may not come to them seeking out live theater. They believe in the power of storytelling and connection to strengthen the community. Even after months of canceled shows, Ginger Poole held on to the idea of staging the theatre's Summer 2020 outreach program, "Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical."

"We kept trying to think out of the box, you know, how can we still provide this to the community?" Poole said. Finally, it dawned on them. By utilizing Mill Mountain Theatre's actor housing – the Atelier – they could test, quarantine, and eventually rehearse together. Facilitated by digital delivery service Broadway OnDemand, they were able to offer "Polkadots" online for 24 days last Fall at no cost to the viewer.

Across town, a different kind of theater was facing its own challenges. The Grandin Theatre is a historic film house known for showing critically acclaimed pictures. A mix of intimate screening rooms with only a few rows of seats and one large theatre sets the Grandin apart from corporate movie theaters. Its glittering marquee welcomes patrons and serves as a landmark for the Grandin neighborhood. For months last year, the marquee was dark.

Out of concern for its patrons and a feeling of responsibility to the community, executives at the Grandin closed the theater proactively, before the state-mandated shutdown. In June, feeling the heaviness of three months of lost revenue, the Grandin Theatre Foundation board sought to deliver the unique experience of private rentals to eager patrons who missed

seeing a film at the theater. Adhering strictly to state guidelines, parties of no more than ten began to make their way back to the Grandin. The offer was met with overwhelming demand and the theater hosted 15 private rentals in June.

As the summer wore on and restrictions lessened, the Grandin slowly opened to the public again. Every Friday in July, they showed classic blockbusters like “Back to the Future” and “Dirty Dancing.” Again, out of an abundance of caution, the Grandin did not open the theater at the mandated 50% capacity. Instead, they filled 90 of 325 seats in the main theater, only 28%. “We wanted to build public confidence and we didn't want to get greedy, and we didn't want to have too many people in the room feel like they weren't safe,” said Grandin Theatre Foundation executive director Ian Fortier.

The Roanoke community yearned for arts and culture, selling out every film at the Grandin during July. The theater continued to operate as a second-run movie house through the end of the year. Corporate movie theaters were not able to weather the pandemic like the Grandin. While weeds grow through the cracks in the pavement at the Regal Cinema down the road, non-traditional sources of income carried the Grandin through.

“This is your theater. My jobs to make sure that you know it your theater and give you as many opportunities as possible to make it be the building that you need it to be,” Fortier said.

In addition to showing films, the Grandin turned to its history and began to serve as a venue for live performances as well. Southwest Virginia Ballet chose to debut its [digital production](#) of “The Nutcracker” at the Grandin, allowing people to safely come together to celebrate tradition. They also performed excerpts of the ballet live. For the ballet, the premiere was a moment of relief – they had, despite the odds, delivered a full version of “The Nutcracker”.

Chapter 4

The Schools

The Taubman Museum of Art's curved architecture is easily recognizable in the Roanoke skyline. From across the city, you can see the evening sun glinting off the building's metal façade. Inside, the art is free. All they ask is that you share your zip code, so they know where you're coming from. The shutdown impacted the Taubman, too, and the building's educational spaces took the biggest hit. Executive director Cindy Petersen and her team adapted the museum's outreach program to offer art at home:

Driven by the Brush Pals initiative, the Taubman was named as one of 30 [finalists](#) for the 2021 National Medal for Museum and Library Service – the highest honor in the nation for museums that demonstrate impact in their communities. Excerpts of Southwest Virginia Ballet's "Nutcracker" were filmed in the galleries of the Taubman and can be seen in the digital version of the ballet.

Chapter 5

Why Art?

In Roanoke, accessibility is the undercurrent of the work arts and culture groups in the valley are doing. Beyond the organizations, the city is overflowing with public art. Murals on street corners remind visitors that the town is alive and that it has a cultural heartbeat.

“And people say, oh, the art for the elites. You think only people who have a college education can connect to art? Do you think that only people who have a college education or a lot of money in the bank can relate to it, can understand it, can interpret it, can make it relevant in their lives? I think that's kind of offensive,” said Roanoke City arts and culture coordinator Douglas Jackson.

His sentiments have been proven time and time again in his work. Many times, the community has rallied to secure funding for public art. Most recently the Arches Project – a collaboration between local artists and students – renewed an undesirable space underneath Memorial Bridge.

When asked what art means to them during a project by the Roanoke Arts Commission in 2015, residents spoke profoundly about the meaning they drew from the public art. Their comments are preserved in this [video](#) on the Arts Commission's website.

A year into the Coronavirus pandemic, arts and culture leaders in Roanoke are still making adjustments. Mill Mountain Theatre and Southwest Virginia Ballet will both offer outdoor performances as the weather warms in May. The Grandin Theatre continues to offer second-run films at 28% capacity in the main theater, and The Taubman has adjusted its gallery spaces to allow for social distancing.

After one year of out-of-the-box ideas, reflection, and resilience, the arts community in the Roanoke Valley has survived. Michael Hemphill, a marketing strategist and nonprofit advocate, is upbeat after a year of watching the local arts community deal with Covid-19.

“The people who work for nonprofits have huge hearts and are doing their best to fulfill a need that is in our community,” he said. “Without that organization, the need would grow larger and more serious.”

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Experience

Multimedia Specialist, 5Points Creative **August 2016 – Present**

Brought on as an intern to assist with video production prior to being hired permanently to manage social media strategy and content, analyze web and social data for clients, and assist on multiple editing projects.

Producer/Editor, CommAgency **January 2020 – May 2021**

Produced promotional and informational videos for a variety of clients. Organized the production process from concept ideation through delivery.

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Facilitated a team of 24 student journalists, created content for TV and web, and trained students how to edit in Adobe Premiere.

Education

The Pennsylvania State University Schreyer Honors College, University Park, PA

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Written & Verbal Communication, Adobe Creative Cloud, Organization, Visual Storytelling, Project Management, Social Media Management, Graphic Design, Team Leadership, Video Editing, Google Analytics, Slack, Copywriting

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