

IN TIMES OF CRISIS, ARTISTS ESSENTIAL FOR INSPIRED, RESILIENT COMMUNITIES | OPINION

Infrastructure for Nashville artists is vulnerable, but the show must go on, for more reasons than sheer entertainment.

Mark Murphy, Guest columnist Published 5:00 a.m. CT May 30, 2020



OZ Arts Nashville is an indoor/outdoor space that takes a multidisciplinary approach to art. (Photo: Submitted)

Nashville was already challenged by a devastating tornado when the true severity of the COVID-19 pandemic became clear. This experience is spotlighting the fragility of our socioeconomic and health care infrastructure, while also shining a warm light on the city's inspired resilience and strength of spirit, derived from shared values we cherish.

Our artists may not be the first essential workers who come to mind during a crisis, but the recent surge in online views of movies, concerts, plays and cultural events isn't due to just boredom.

We have an inherent need for the inspiration that artists provide. This won't be news to Nashvillians, who have made this town one of the richest hotbeds of songwriters who are vital storytellers, especially in trying times.

That tradition has helped build an audience that is also eager to discover new and unconventional ways to experience stories. There's a growing interest in the work of playwrights, choreographers, poets and visual artists – including collaborative artists who are combining these artistic disciplines in brilliant new ways.

As a recent Nashville transplant, I now realize I'm part of a wave of "creatives" drawn to this vibrant city at a time when it is rapidly evolving into an even more significant international cultural center. At the invitation of OZ Arts Nashville, a nonprofit center for contemporary art and performance in West Nashville, I relocated from Los Angeles this January after a year of frequent flying between the two cities as a long-distance artistic director.



Mark Murphy (Photo: Submitted)

Nashville and Los Angeles are vastly different, but both cities share the distinction of being iconic centers of the entertainment industry, where commercial culture dominates the cultural landscape. That status makes them magnets for remarkable talent, which also creates a fertile culture for nonprofit and noncommercial art forms, yet both cities have limited cultural infrastructure, especially for the performing arts.

Ironically, the classic showbiz fantasy of artists being suddenly discovered and thrust into the stardom of Nashville or Hollywood can lead to a lack of appreciation for the essential work of cultural institutions that create a well-rounded arts community. In reality, the performing arts is an incredibly labor-intensive field, requiring long-term development periods, performer training, rehearsal spaces and a creative team of innovative designers and artists to bring productions to life.

Filling a gap in the cultural scene

It is exciting to join the Nashville arts community at a time when the cultural infrastructure is showing signs of growth, which hopefully won't be sidelined by current events. Despite suffering moderate damage in the tornado, OZ Arts hopes to enhance its position as one of a handful of ambitious Nashville cultural institutions trying to fill an essential gap in the city's cultural scene.

In addition to an array of small and medium-sized organizations pushing art forms forward in Nashville, our colleagues at Nashville Ballet stand out for their growing commitment to feature original works each season and incubating an impressive and increasingly diverse corps of dancers. Nashville Repertory Theater's annual Ingram New Works Lab also makes a bold commitment to develop new plays by both local and national writers, creating additional infrastructure for new theatrical works to grow.

As the region grapples with unforeseen economic challenges, it is important that cultural institutions are included among the many small businesses that will need strategic and financial shoring up to survive these trying times. The nonprofit business model requires income beyond what is generated in ticket sales, especially since the organizations must invest in the important role of nurturing artistic development, while striving to keep access affordable for audiences struggling with their own financial recovery.

Hopefully foundations, individuals, corporations and government agencies will help ensure that the city's cultural community doesn't lose too much momentum as it reemerges from this extended intermission.

We must remember to strengthen culture as we also address other basic human needs. As the cultural heritage officials of UNESCO proclaimed: "Culture makes us resilient and gives us hope. It reminds us that we are not alone. We need a concerted and global effort to support artists and ensure access to culture for all."

Mark Murphy is the executive and artistic director of OZ Arts Nashville.



View of the 2016 Modular Art Pods (MAP) event at OZ Arts (Photo: Submitted)