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A Stable Environment





BY EVELYN WILDE MAYERSON

Up in the Air

EVEN WITH THEIR PUBLIC INTERACTIONS CURTAILED,
ARTISTS ALWAYS FIND AN OUTLET FOR THEIR CREATIVITY

No serious artist I know creates work to “blush unseen ... on the desert air,” a line from 18th-century English poet Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” although the coronavirus pandemic may have forced it on them, leaving them up in the air like the acrobats of the Rony Roller traveling circus, who set up for a stint outside Rome and then got stuck there by the lockdown.

With venues suddenly dark, orchestras, concert promoters, theater and opera companies, and dance troupes have kissed their fall seasons goodbye, and, like the song in the musical “Damn Yankees,” can only “wait for next year and hope.” Riverside Theatre is doing just that. Producing Artistic Director Allen Cornell tells me that the staff and entire production crew are back in the building preparing with crossed fingers for next season’s musical “Carousel.”



Detail of “Sunset Serenade” by Linda Arnold, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches



David Pershall performs the role of Figaro in Rossini’s “The Barber of Seville.”

Artists tell of the urgent need to transform this cataclysmic collective experience into art. Russian novelist and political prisoner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn would have argued, as he did in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature, that beyond expressive need, it was the responsibility of the artist to reflect the issues of his day.

Street artists, the ultimate social commentators, have been the first to do this, as seen in Denver-based artist Austin Zucchini-Fowler’s mural of a winged health care worker wearing a face mask and a pair of red boxing gloves, an icon reflected in Spike Lee’s short film “New York New York,” which ends with hospital workers in protective gear arriving like the cavalry.

The only forum needed by street artists is a brick wall. To find out what happens to creative folks in lockdown who might require greater commitment, I interviewed four artists, each with a strong connection to Vero Beach, each highly successful, all on hold.

Two months before the sudden flip of the light switch, Vero Beach Opera’s 2020 season opened on Sunday, Jan. 12, at the Vero Beach High School Performing Arts Center with Gioachino Rossini’s

rollicking comic masterpiece “The Barber of Seville” to a sold-out audience of 1,000.

Fully staged, with four Metropolitan artists under the baton of critically acclaimed maestro Joel Revzen, who has since, sadly, succumbed to COVID-19, the production was a highlight of an abbreviated season. Starring in the title role of the mischievous barber Figaro was acclaimed young baritone David Pershall, who acts as well as he sings, engaging his audience at his entrance with the ringing high notes of the opera’s most famous aria, “Largo al Factotum” (“Make Way for the Factotum”).

I reach Pershall by phone at his home in Manlius, New York, a quiet, residential village outside Syracuse. There, in a two-story colonial home, he is sequestered from uncertainty and contagion with his wife, Kathleen, and their three young children. Family time, which was until recently a limited, precious commodity, is now all the time, except in the mornings when Pershall retires to his studio to practice singing and study operas. With extended tours canceled into the near future, he spends the rest of his day “at the grocery store and that’s about it.”

Pershall says he went into isolation March 7 after



Linda Arnold paints in her studio, formerly a manufacturing plant.



Adam Schnell rehearses with two Ballet Vero Beach dancers.

rehearsing the cantata “Belshazzar’s Feast” when he was awakened in his hotel room in New Haven, Connecticut. Informed that all his scheduled performances had been canceled, his major concern was how to get home safely to his family and not bring anything back.

Opera singing involves appearances all over the world. For Pershall, that includes the San Francisco Opera, the San Diego Opera and the Washington National Opera, the Norwegian National Opera, the Vienna State Opera and a debut as Marcello in Verdi’s “La Boheme” at Salzburg, where critics proclaimed his performance “show-stealing” and “magnificent.” Pershall says he especially misses the camaraderie of rehearsals, of ironing out technical difficulties and tweaking issues, of “coming together for the music.”

Like Pershall, painter Linda Arnold, known for her shimmering, luminous sea and landscapes, has executed her art in many parts of the world, including the 8,000-foot-high cloud forests of Ecuador in the Andes Mountains, where, in the words of 19th century German poet and mountaineer Heinrich Heine, “you forgot everything but your own feet.”

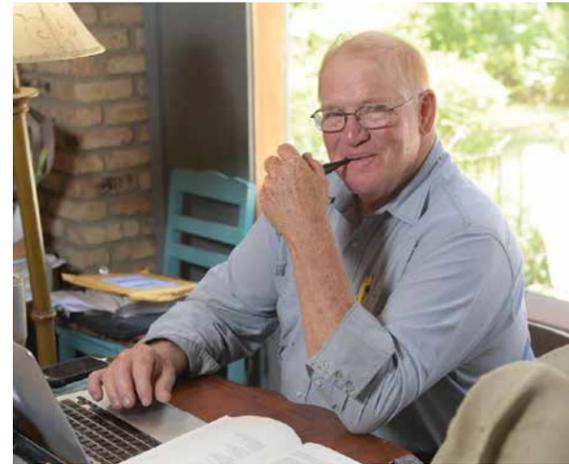
Meghan Candler describes Arnold as fearless and unafraid to take risks. Arnold describes herself as a plein air artist in the impressionistic tradition. From my perspective there is little traditional about her. Until they fell apart and she had to trade them for a pair of paint-spattered sneakers, she painted in combat boots. She is edging toward abstract geometrics, a more difficult execution than representational art, while her color palette is becoming more nuanced. In addition, she has traded the rectangular canvas for the square, a

shape that “forces your eye to move differently.”

Arnold lives in the Upper East Side of New York with her husband, Bob. She used to ride the subway to her studio in an old manufacturing plant in Long Island City, where she paints until the natural light fades. Now she opts for a cab with a plexiglass shield between driver and passenger. Except for a brief visit to grown children in Baltimore, Arnold has remained in New York. I ask why she didn’t flee, as so many did, a city considered an epicenter of contagion, where the only sound she heard was sirens. “It’s where I live,” she replies. “It’s where I get my energy. The tragic losses all around me make me realize how important it is to grab the moment. I can still paint. Who knows what’s around the corner?”

The last time I interviewed Adam Schnell, director of dance education for Riverside Theatre and founding artistic director of Ballet Vero Beach, he ironically anticipated Arnold’s remark when he said, “Nothing in life is certain.” It was the day after I had seen “Nutcracker on the Indian River,” Schnell’s imaginative reinterpretation of Tchaikovsky’s classic ballet in which the libretto features Vero Beach’s topography, history and habitat, including land crabs, manatees and bougainvilleas costumed by Travis Halsey. This time we discuss how sudden sequestration has affected his thoughts. “What has happened to all of us,” he replies, “is a sobering wake-up call. It raises the question of what we are doing with our lives.”

I ask what he is doing with his life now that he and the ballet company he manages are on hold. Schnell describes the tranquil view of the harbor with manatees and other wildlife from the condo he shares with



As a poet living on a 600-acre ranch, Sean Sexton has not been much perturbed by the constraints of social distancing.

his husband, Ballet Master Camilo A. Rodrigues. “We are very lucky,” Schnell says. When they are not at home, they “take class” at the now-empty dance studio at Riverside Theatre, where they practice ballet positions at the barre, perform grand jetes across a modified linoleum floor that, Schnell tells me, has just the right amount of friction. “Many dancers can’t get to a studio,” he says. “It helps to keep a sense of normalcy.”

Schnell also has a ballet company to manage. Anxious to plan the coming season, he is keenly aware of restrictions produced by the pandemic placed on both audience and performer. “It’s a delicate balance between optimism and sensitivity to the need for safety.” While he has been overwhelmed by the support of his donors, he worries about younger dancers, who typically face a short career. “We could lose the dancer of a generation and never know it.”

Like Schnell, rancher-poet Sean Sexton, grandson of Vero pioneer Waldo Sexton, wears more than one hat, although in actuality the only thing that covers his head is a worn-out Stetson. He lives on a working 600-acre ranch 8 miles west of Vero Beach with his wife, Sharon, an artist known for ceramics rooted in her keen observations of nature.

Sexton spends most of his time moving 350 head of mixed Angus and Brahman cattle from one pasture to another. Although he has pivoted to a few live-streaming readings, his daily life has not changed much during the pandemic, since he is already socially distanced. His biggest adaptation has been to the transfer of his studio from a shed now being used to store Sharon’s equipment while her own studio is under completion to an outdoor porch with a light.



When not working with cattle or writing poetry, Sean Sexton paints and works in pottery – interests he shares with his wife, Sharon.

“I love working on a porch,” he says. “It’s where I go to write sometimes at three in the morning when an idea hits me.”

Sexton’s images are as earthy as peat, like the floor of a cattle pen after a heavy rain, “a tree-lined mirror.” Author of three published volumes of poetry, panelist, inaugural poet laureate of Indian River County and frequent performer at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, Sexton also organizes the annual Poetry and Barbecue event held in April, canceled this year like everything else.

“The drama of a halted world is motivating to me,” he says. “I have been especially mobilized, able to suddenly finish things I started a long time ago.” Asked if his subject matter has been affected, he replies, “I imagine so. Fateful things are weighing on me.” Below is the first stanza of a recently completed “fateful thing” entitled “Voices”:

Another sleepless night passes as I sit
writing in the cool air of the porch
exiled again to unsettling thoughts
of disease, family and money, disruptions
to our lives as the dream of spring is held fast
in a grip of unbroken drought, depleted
pastures and no promise of weather for weeks.
This should be May instead of March.

An impressive lot, all four, motivated not only by considerable talent but by courage, a certain pluck best summed up by Linda Arnold’s description of a woman tap dancing on a box on the streets of New York with a sign, “You can’t stop art.” ☘