

The Show Must Go On, Eventually

THE SHEDD INSTITUTE MEETS CALAMITY WITH COMMUNITY

By Alexis Reid

Eugene's Shedd Institute for the Arts was riding the wave of one of its best years ever when Gov. Kate Brown banned public gatherings in March.

"Through May 30, we had 19 of our own concerts/events, 13 rental events and a 400-plus students-per-week music school all going great guns when, whap! Nothing," Jim Ralph says.

The Shedd's co-founders Jim and Ginevra Ralph saw the nonprofit organization lose all three of those major income streams. They laid off 30 members of their production team. Tack on a multi-million dollar remodel project and a significant drop off in donations, and they've hit a perfect storm.

Performing arts has been one of the industries hardest hit by social-distancing and stay-at-home orders during the pandemic. Even with the spring's gradual reopening detailed in Brown's three-phase plan, theaters and concert halls will likely be the last to open their doors. Nevertheless, the Ralphs are mostly business as usual, preparing to hit the ground running when it's safe to bring the music back.

They've managed to keep a core staff to maintain the daily business of finances and planning, and more than 60 students have adjusted to online lessons with about half of the instructors teaching remotely from home — cats on pianos welcome.

The Shedd's music school has been the recent focus of a massive facelift for the 94-year-old building, a former Baptist church. In April, I got a chance to tour the freshly carpeted halls, the first interview I've done wearing a face mask. What was once awkward, unusable space with a \$230,000 asbestos problem is now functional elegance.

"Our whole strategy with this is to make the building more accessible, more welcoming, more energy-efficient, more staff efficient and safer," Ginevra Ralph says.

Simple soundproof rooms with heavy wooden doors

stand ready to take on the trumpets and guitars of Eugene. For now, the only music that can be heard is a grainy top 40 radio station from the construction crew.

"Ideally, we'll have enough to do the roof this summer, because you've got to do it. Otherwise, you just wreck all the stuff you just did. My snag is cash flow for capital right now," Ginevra Ralph says.

The Shedd's current remodeling stage with Chambers Construction will run out at the end of May. Then it will be time to reassess further stages. Upon completion, and with recent cost increases due to the current crisis, the remodel is on target to exceed the original estimated \$16 million in total costs. The Shedd has currently raised \$10 million, but uncertainties remain.

Financial insecurities aside, the Ralphs are doing their best to maintain a connection with the community. Ginevra Ralph, along with the Shedd Loop Committee, is continuing her initiative on Loop technology, providing personal loop loaners with support from Lane Community Cultural Coalition to make music accessible to the hearing impaired. The Shedd is also working on an old-timey newsletter featuring artist profiles and the underbelly secrets of making a musical. Ginevra Ralph has even baked cookies for loyal donors desperate to hear the music again.

Local artists are a particular concern for the Ralphs.

"These people wake up in the morning, and they make their living by serving the community — there are far fewer supports for people who are on their own. You can contribute to the organization but not the artists themselves," Jim Ralph says.

Magical Moombah maestro Tom Wilson lost all five of his jobs in the shutdown, which has left him plenty of time to prepare for at least the next two shows. The Moombah, The Shedd's musical vaudeville for kids, is a quarterly event that allows some flexibility in rescheduling. As of now, the summer show is still on, but will likely get bumped to a later date. Wilson, who is set to play

Capt. Hook in The Shedd's still-scheduled September production of *Peter Pan*, is eager to get back at it. No one is quite ready to go to virtual performances.

"An online show wouldn't have nearly the flavor; none of us are really excited about that. Being in the room where it happens, not to quote *Hamilton*, if you're not there, then it's just not the same," Wilson says.

Shirley Andress, one of The Shedd's long time artistic directors, is busy working from her Creswell home on next spring's Doris Day-themed Jazz Kings concert, as well as The Shedd's annual Christmas show, a hopeful exclamation point on a dismal 2020.

"I'm so thankful for the work and for my conversations with The Shedd. That has given me something to do besides cleaning out my cupboards," Andress says.

Andress, along with Shedd friends Storm Kennedy, Siri Vik and Lyn Burg, found a way to stay connected through the shutdown by parking their cars, six feet apart, in the empty parking lot at Valley River Center. At Burg's suggestion, the group turned their communal social distancing into a dance party around their respective car trunks.

As for formal productions, almost all of The Shedd's productions through the end of summer are postponed, including its biggest draw, The Oregon Festival of American Music.

While uncertainty surrounds, The Shedd seems prepared to weather the storm for as long as it takes. Capacity limitations might require some creative adjustments, arranging chairs six feet apart from one another, splitting audiences into multiple shows. The Shedd is ready for anything.

"Whether it's the Hult Center, or the Axe and Fiddle, or Sam Bond's Garage, churches, bars, we all get together and share our lives together, and we're going to find a way that we can continue to do that," Jim Ralph says. ■

See more information about The Shedd Institute and its season at TheShedd.org.

Social Distance Swing

ELECTRO-SWING ENSEMBLE **HIGH STEP SOCIETY** RELEASES NEW EP

By Will Kennedy

Before heading into the studio to record their latest EP, *Perception*, Eugene electro-swing ensemble **High Step Society** was emerging from a difficult transition in personnel, says bandleader Ethan Rainwater, despite winning *Eugene Weekly's* Best of Eugene Best Band category just last year.

High Step Society brought in singer Betty Jaeger — one of Eugene's best voices. Jaeger is also known for her own work with groups like Baroque Betty, among many others. "She really stepped up," Rainwater says.

With a new singer in place, High Step was finally ready to record its new EP. Out now, *Perception* is the popular live band's third studio release, and the first for Austin record label Gravitas Recordings.

Popular in Europe and increasingly in the U.S., electro-swing blends traditional jazz and swing with house music,

EDM and hip hop — like 1920s-era, dance-all-night hot jazz meeting the synthetic pulse of an Ibiza nightclub.

This may seem like a contradiction, but with High Step tracks like "Perception," it starts making sense, as the two styles gel and induce a kind of fevered reverie.

The COVID-19 lockdown has offered few options for an EP-release celebration, so instead, High Step live-streamed a show from the Whiteaker Firehouse, an ever-evolving artist grotto in Eugene, where portions of the EP were also recorded.

Although the show was a ton of work, "the end product was top notch," Rainwater says. "We were all so excited to do a show after being holed up in our separate quarantines. It was a big release."

Rainwater says the future looks bright for High Step Society. The band is already working on new material. "We've been incredibly productive during this time,"



Rainwater says, while also fielding offers for more live streaming.

"Stay tuned," Rainwater says. ■

Perception is available to stream on all major music streaming services. High Step Society's EP release live stream is archived on the band's YouTube channel.