



Williamsburg Area Arts Commission

Fall 2021 Venue Needs Survey – Summary of Responses

In fall 2021, the Williamsburg Area Arts Commission conducted a survey of its grantees, with specific interest in what, in a post-pandemic world, our groups would need in order to bring the art they are creating directly to the communities of Williamsburg, James City, and York counties, and to the many thousands of tourists who visit our area each year.

The Commission wanted to know whether current available facilities meet the needs of those groups in terms of seating capacity, acoustics, lighting, dressing rooms, prop and set storage, stage flooring and, most importantly, availability.

The results reveal a critical lack of space for theater, vocal performance, orchestral and dance groups, a shortage that has been exacerbated by the pandemic-related closure (or limited availability) of many existing spaces.

Our review of the responses leads the commission to conclude that our community has a vital need for a theater space that is large enough to accommodate our opera, theater, and dance companies; one that is located in an area convenient to restaurants and parking and that is independently operated rather than under the control of another institution or attraction.

“A performing arts organization exists through performing,” said Naama Zahavi-Ely, artistic director of Opera in Williamsburg, “and for that, one needs a physical location to perform in.”

Summary of Responses

Of the 25 organizations that received 2021 grants from the WAAC, 19 completed the survey. Though many grantees reported they could use help finding volunteers, with funding, and with marketing, 100 percent cited public attendance at the events they stage as the way in which they hope the public will engage with them.

In order for that to happen, of course, our dancers, musicians, and actors need places to perform. All the world’s a stage but there are too few available on the peninsula.

Respondents expressed a need for venues that will accommodate small audiences of 50 people for intimate concerts, to more than 500 hundred for dance recitals, operas, choral performances, and symphonies.

Ideally, a venue would have space for storage of props, sets, and costumes during tech week and between performances. Dressing rooms are also a must for theater and dance groups; most of the survey respondents who need them require at least two to separate participants by gender.

For dance groups, a huge issue is flooring. A wood floor is workable; a concrete or carpeted floor is not. A Marley floor is preferred; a sprung floor, ideal. Floor material that is conducive to carrying sound is also an important consideration to theater groups and to performance groups, especially those that work without microphones.

Most of the WAAC grantees currently work within the confines of whatever lighting is available at the venue where they are performing but some have invested in portable lighting that can be adjusted on site. In an ideal world, there would be theater infrastructure that would accommodate the varying needs of clients. Those include spotlights, strobe lighting, downlighting, whitewash, backlighting, and rear-wall projection. Musicians need lighting that can be adjusted so they see their music but not be blinded when they lift their heads.

All of those specifics notwithstanding, grantees have learned to make do with what's available, using conventional but not perfect spaces to bring their art to audiences: school buildings, libraries, community centers, churches, sidewalks, streets closed to traffic, and various green spaces. For Williamsburg Live, the Virginia Arts Festival builds a (temporary) concert venue on the lawn of Colonial Williamsburg's Art Museum with 1,800 seats under a tent and room on the grass for 3,200 more attendees. An Occasion for the Arts turns the area around Merchants Square into an open-air parade of entertainment every October with multiple stages on Prince George, Duke of Gloucester, and Boundary streets.

Pandemic closures and restrictions have pushed arts groups to even greater ingenuity. Many organizations moved performances outdoors as soon as the weather permitted. The Williamsburg Players held a cabaret in their parking lot. Stagelights, a theater education program for children and teens, held their summer camp at Freedom Park. Opera in Williamsburg quickly pivoted from a planned performance of *Pagliacci* on the grass outside the Williamsburg Community Building to the adjacent parking garage when rain threatened cancellation. Virginia Opera performed a mainstage production of *Das Rheingold* at Topgolf, a driving range, in Virginia Beach.

Regrettably, post-pandemic, WAAC grantees will again face the same challenge as before: the very limited number of public stages. "The availability of performance space is a huge issue," said Adelle Carpenter of the Virginia Regional Ballet. "We are all fighting for the same space." Naama Zahavi-Ely, the opera's artistic director, agreed. "Performing venue/space is by far the biggest limiting factor for Opera in Williamsburg at this time."

Area Stages

The historic Kimball Theatre in Merchants Square is a beloved institution. However, as it was designed as a movie theatre, the stage is small, the backstage area inadequate, and the seating capacity limited to an audience of less than 400. "We love performing at the Kimball and their pricing is fair, but the seating is not always adequate for our audience sizes and there is not enough backstage space for our larger performances," said Melissa Cantrell of the Institute for Dance.

The auditorium at the Williamsburg Regional Library has also been a popular option for performance groups but it, too, has limitations. "The biggest challenges we face with the

library theater is that the stage is small and so sets can be tricky to move on and off and there are only two very small dressing rooms,” said M.J. Devaney of Stagelights. The library auditorium also seats only a maximum of 268 people. Limited seating capacity is a problem for groups that depend upon ticket sales to keep their operations afloat. “The (venues) do not hold enough audience members per show, forcing an increase in ticket prices,” said Virginia Regional Ballet’s Carpenter.

Groups like the Choral Guild, which has approximately 100 members, need a stage large enough to accommodate the entire ensemble on risers. “At certain performances, we add a local high school or college choir so they too must be accommodated,” said Thomas Connor of the Guild. Larger performing groups also create a need for additional parking.

Privately owned venues, like the auditorium at The Crosswalk in Norge, offer increased seating capacity but have become very expensive to rent in the last year, with planned price hikes this year that will put the facility financially out of range for some of our grantees.

Scheduling Issues

Another factor to consider is that none of the most popular places to perform in the Williamsburg area is independently operated. The Kimball Theatre’s availability is limited to those times when the College of William & Mary is not in session (as will be the same with Phi Beta Kappa Hall when construction is completed.) “We would have loved to perform at other times of the year and to put on more full opera productions, but right now this is impossible for lack of an available performing venue,” said Zahavi-Ely.

Some groups use area high schools although their availability has been severely limited by COVID restrictions over the past two years. School auditoriums are also rarely available for rehearsals, and says Zahavi-Ely, and offer a very different audience experience than theater, symphony, and opera-goers are accustomed to. “The artists can create beautiful operas in ‘unusual spaces’ like lobbies, train stations, malls, museum display rooms, churches, general-purpose community spaces and the like,” she said. “But such spaces offer very limited and uncomfortable seating without good sightlines. It is the *audience* which needs a stage, decent acoustics, comfortable seats with clear sight lines, bathrooms, lobbies, and good access -- in other words, a theater.”

COVID Complications

Looking ahead to 2022 and beyond, grantees continue to struggle with how to plan for whatever may occur with the pandemic and its variants. “As we face this coming year, COVID is of primary concern, both for rehearsing and for performances,” said Connor of the Choral Guild. “Our past venues are still deciding how best to handle future performances. The Guild is still determining the best way to begin the rehearsals for our upcoming season.”

“Not all venues are open right now and it’s hard to plan for the future,” said Susan Releford, of the Williamsburg Women’s Chorus. “With the upswing in COVID cases, finding a space is proving difficult.”

The Wish List

WAAC grantees have been tested in the past two years but many have managed to turn the proverbial sow's ear into a silk purse, livestreaming concerts as Tidewater Classical Guitar has done, or holding a socially distanced theater camp such as Stagelights did in Freedom Park last summer. Those efforts are commendable because arts programming is not just a vital component to residents of the communities where we live, but to the many people who come to Jamestown, Yorktown, and Williamsburg to visit.

As the City and Counties reimagine a use for the Visitor's Center property, WAAC respondents spoke through our survey about the crucial need for a performance space that is not under the scheduling control of Colonial Williamsburg or the College of William & Mary. The location of any new facility will be critical to its success.

"One of the strengths of the Kimball is its spatial integration with Merchants Square, Colonial Williamsburg, the College of William and Mary, and the Arts District," said the opera's Zahavi-Ely. "This means that one can leave one's car parked for dinner or a picnic followed by an opera, or an opera followed by a social time with friends. For out-of-town visitors, the draw of such a setting is even stronger, and they can benefit from and patronize Williamsburg's extensive tourism infrastructure."

Neil Holland of the Williamsburg Players can attest to that. One of his theater's struggles is its location on a mostly residential street a block from the Edge District but not within walking distance of any restaurants. "We're grateful to own our own space, but it is not in a very visible neighborhood," he said.

Sustaining artistic endeavors is a valuable component of a healthy economy, especially in an area that must constantly offer something new to potential (and returning) visitors. According to Americans for the Arts, Williamsburg and James City County were home to 198 arts-related businesses that employed 1,134 people in 2017. Arts belong here not just because they are good for business, but because the business of our community depends upon the creativity of local artists.

What we've learned from reading the responses to our survey is that they need a home. Our artists – and our community – need a space that will provide them with a reliably available place to bring their art to audiences, a complex that will support multiple uses from the myriad of groups who we already support with public funds.

"The Williamsburg area has a discerning population of arts-lovers who recognize quality and are willing to support it," said Zahavi-Ely. "We hope to continue to perform for them for years to come," she added.

*Williamsburg Area Arts Commission
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