

# The art of crawling out from the rubble of pandemic

David Lyman, Special to Cincinnati Enquirer Published 5:01 a.m. ET May 28, 2020 | Updated 11:28 a.m. ET May 28, 2020



Jay Wade, right, and Sharrell D. Luckett (back, left) starred in Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati's production of Dominique Morisseau's award-winning play "Pipeline." It opened on March 11. It closed the following day when Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine banned gatherings of more than 100 people. (Photo: Ryan Kurtz/Provided)

Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati's production of Dominique Morisseau's "Pipeline" opened March 11. It had all the hallmarks of a hit. The script was sensational, the audience enthusiastic.

The next day, artistic director D. Lynn Meyers announced that the show was closing. Because of the novel coronavirus pandemic, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine had announced a statewide ban on mass gatherings of 100 people or more.

ETC wasn't alone, of course. Within a week, [nearly every Cincinnati area arts organization had laid off employees](#), locked its doors and, to all intents, closed up shop.



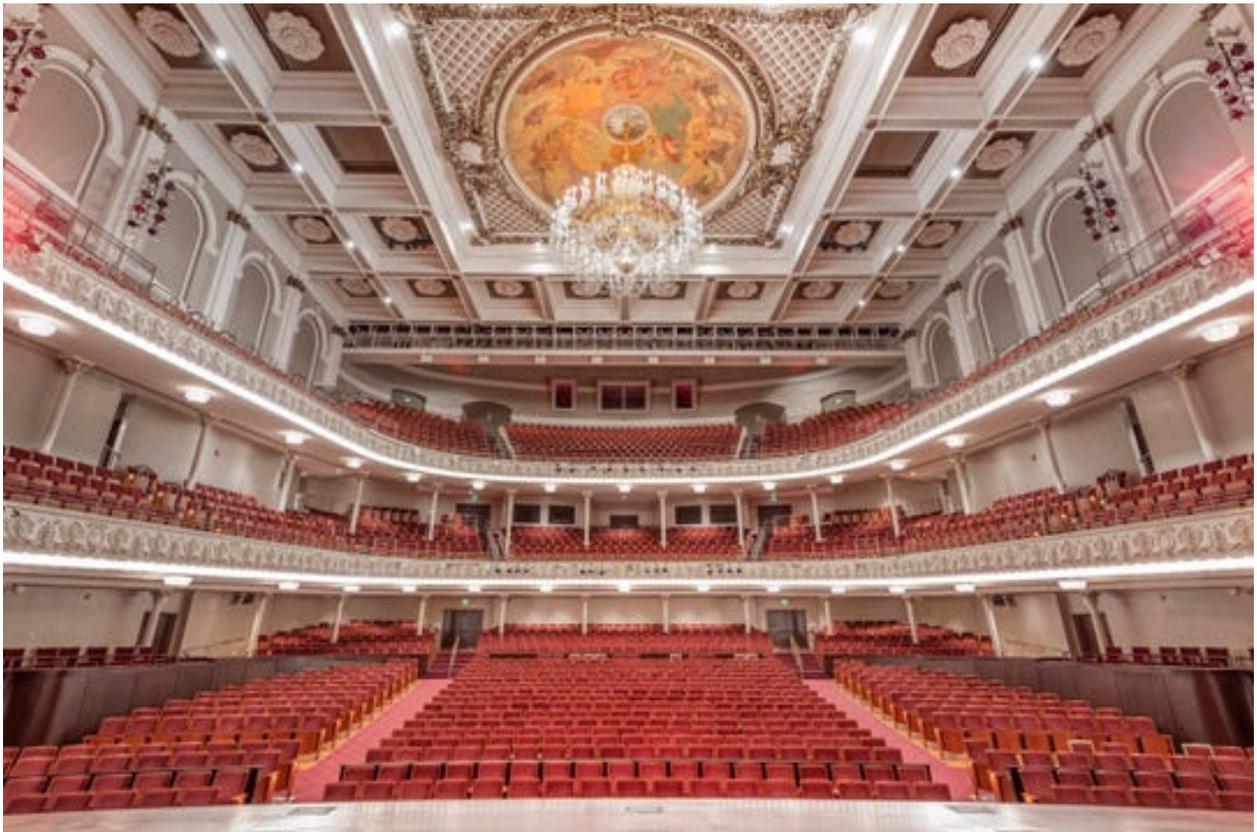
**Playhouse in the Park, empty.** (Photo: Daniel Smyth/Provided)

“It was devastating,” says Blake Robison, artistic director of the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, the largest of the city’s resident theater companies. “It was painful to see one thing close after another. It felt like cutting off your arm two inches at a time.”

Though the arts and entertainment sector is often regarded as an optional aspect of life, it is a huge economic powerhouse. There are more than 225 nonprofit arts organizations employing more than 10,000 people in Greater Cincinnati, according to ArtsWave, a 93-year-old group that raises more than \$12 million annually to support cultural activities.

“The irony of this virus is that the superpower of the arts to bring people together is the thing that has been made impossible,” says Alecia Kintner, President and CEO of ArtsWave. “The fundamental thing the arts does has been upended.”

There was a time in the not-too-distance past that Cincinnati’s small and medium-sized organizations would have been left to fend for themselves. But over the course of the past three decades, ArtsWave – once devoted to just the largest groups – has become a champion of the full spectrum of arts organizations.



**Music Hall, home of The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, The May Festival and The Cincinnati Opera, without an audience** (Photo: Provided)

The resultant flourishing of the arts has made Greater Cincinnati a bustling hub of artistic activity.

“There is a tremendous positive energy here,” says Stephen A. Loftin, president of the Cincinnati Arts Association, which oversees the area’s two largest theater facilities. Music Hall is home to the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Opera and the Cincinnati Ballet, while the Aronoff Center’s three theaters house everything from touring Broadway productions to the barebones productions of the Cincinnati Playwrights Initiative. “So you’re seeing lots of ingenuity at work.”

As with everywhere else, there have been hundreds of online play-readings, exhibits, music performances and dance classes. But there have also been wonderfully innovative projects.



**Cincinnati artist Lorena Molina holds a photo that was one of hundreds of pieces of art distributed by Cincinnati's Wavepool Gallery as part of an ad hoc food distribution program to help the gallery's neediest neighbors. (Photo: Provided)**

Wave Pool is a small gallery in Camp Washington, one of Cincinnati's poorest neighborhoods. The median family income is just \$27,669. More than one-third of the local families live below the poverty level.

"We have always had a deep connection with our community," says Cal Cullen, Wave Pool's co-founder and executive director. "When all of this happened, it was an opportunity for us to put our mission to the test and do what we should be doing – listening to our neighbors and doing our part in offering creative solutions."

In this case, that meant becoming a food pantry. But a food pantry with art. Each week, Wave Pool distributes 100 or so boxes of food to its most needy neighbors. Each box includes a small work of original art.

"People love it," says Cullen. "It's very personal, like a memorial to this time we're living in."

Soon after the shutdown, the Cincinnati Playhouse launched "Monologues of Hope," commissioning 10 local playwrights to write short monologues, then hiring 10 local actors to record the scenes to be shared online.



**The Procter and Gamble Hall of The Aronoff Center** (Photo: Daniel Smyth)

Cincinnati Opera launched Opera at Home, including “Opera and Yoga” classes, “Opera Storybook Hour” for kids and “Apartment Arias,” which presents various performers singing at home. There’s an especially hilarious blooper featuring bass Morris Robinson, who sang the role of Porgy in last year’s production of “Porgy and Bess.”

All of this takes money, of course. And this is where ArtsWave and other foundations have been especially important. In the case of Wave Pool, the ad hoc food pantry is funded by emergency grants from ArtsWave and the Greater Cincinnati Foundation. The Haile Foundation is also stepping in to help small and medium-sized groups. Same with Fotofocus, a nonprofit that canceled its 2020 biennial and will distribute its \$800,000 budget to support its partner organizations.

Yes, there are plenty of darker scenarios, as well. The Cincinnati Opera had to cancel its long-awaited 100th anniversary celebrations. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra cut short its 125th anniversary season. Similar scenarios played out in every one of the city’s landmark arts organizations, including the Taft Museum of Art, which was preparing to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the mansion that houses it.



**An artist's rendering of the Art Climb, a grand, art-lined stairway stretching from the intersection of Eden Park Drive and Gilbert Avenue to the entrance of the Cincinnati Art Museum. The first phase of the project opened May 7. (Photo: Human Nature/Provided)**

But there has been a remarkable resilience through all of this. Construction work continues unabated on new, game-changing facilities for Cincinnati Ballet and the Playhouse in the Park. And the Cincinnati Art Museum recently opened “Art Climb,” an expansive art-lined staircase that offers a link between the museum and the nearby Walnut Hills neighborhood.

“This pandemic has made me appreciate Cincinnati even more than I already did,” says Raphaela Platow, director and chief curator of the Contemporary Arts Center, located in the heart of the city’s central business district. “We all put the community and our visitors first. It really speaks to the city of Cincinnati as a close-knit community, but also to the openness we have in working with one another. It’s a collaborative spirit that I have not experienced in other cities. I think that’s why things work here that might not work anywhere else.”



The Contemporary Arts Center without visitors (Photo: Ryan Strand)

## What's next

Arts institutions will open. Someday. But when that might be is hard to say. State of Ohio officials have permitted restaurants and parks and salons to open. But publicly, they have been unwilling to offer any speculation about how soon we might be able to go to a museum or theater.

Here are a few things we can reasonably expect.

1. Museums will open first. They have lots of open space, so social distancing is easy. It could happen as soon as mid-June.
2. Anything that takes place in a theater with fixed seating will be last in line for reopening. Are you ready to share arm-rests with strangers? Neither is anyone else. Regulators may give their blessing to theaters by the end of the summer. But it could take a year or more before audience members are comfortable with the arrangement.
3. We may see outdoor events permitted by mid-summer. Probably not in high-density, fixed-seating venues like the Riverbend Music Center, though their website still has a few performances that haven't been canceled. More likely are events like Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's touring productions in area parks. And possibly outdoor concert venues like the band shell in Devou Park or Seabreeze Pavilion in Eden Park.

**4.** Drive-in movies will have a resurgence. But enjoy them while you can. Once we feel safe going to indoor movie theaters again, drive-ins will continue their inexorable slide to extinction. So indulge your nostalgia while you can. Long-term, not even a pandemic will stave off the death of drive-ins.