

SCENES OF RESILIENCE: HOW THEATERS DRIVE CULTURE DURING THE PANDEMIC

HOME



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Nabucco, the great opera by Giuseppe Verdi, went down in history for the choir “Va pensiero, sull’ali dorate” (“Fly, thought, on golden wings”), which talks about exile and the resilience of a people against adversity. It is not by chance that it was the last thing to resonate at the Teatro Colón, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Four days and two rehearsals from its premiere last March, the artists and employees left the stage to prevent the spread of COVID-19, as the pandemic began to spread across Latin America and the Caribbean. “It was very strange and very difficult, a mixture of feelings: between fear, concern and responsibility,” explains María Victoria Alcaraz, its director.

Teatro Colón was not the only venue to lower its curtains in March. Theaters closed all over the region, forcing a suspension of cultural performances whose impact is still under evaluation. In Argentina, as of June 12, there were 342 premieres suspended and 59 tours postponed, according to a [census](#) by the Association of Professionals of the Scenic Direction.

On the other side of the Andes, the Network of Theaters in Santiago de Chile estimates a suspension of more than 400 performances, with [losses of over US\\$ 38,000](#) by April 21. One of the first establishments to close was Santiago’s iconic Municipal Theater, where various measures have been taken to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. “We have cut operational costs, reduced personnel, and we are applying a 20% salary reduction for permanent staff. It has not been easy, but we are fighting and doing everything to make to the end of the year,” explains Carmen Gloria Larenas, general director of the Chilean institution.

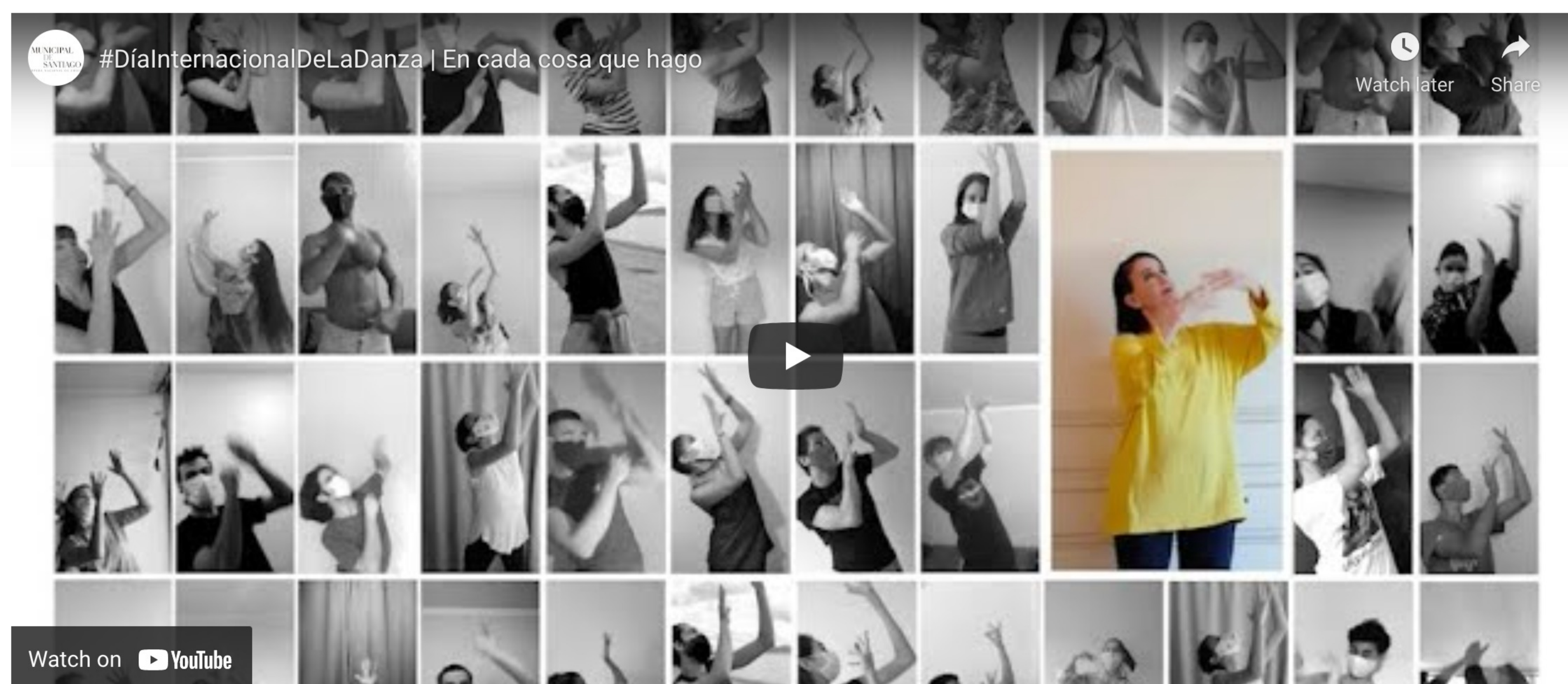


THE CHALLENGE OF A VIRTUAL STAGE

María Victoria and Carmen Gloria are the first women to assume the direction of Teatro Colón and Santiago’s Municipal Theatre, respectively. As in the Nabucco storyline, both have shown the importance of being resilient, a characteristic of female leadership and the cultural and creative industries.

“This is typical of a woman, to see what we have and to do something with it. We did not succumb. Of course we suffered, and it has been scary, but here we are and we have to fight,” says María Victoria. As a cultural manager, she was the author of a “cultural first aid kit” for crises and catastrophe situations, a concept that she now applies at Teatro Colón, where the team’s personal and professional experiences are used to develop creative solutions.

For Carmen Gloria, the challenge began as soon as she took charge of the Municipal Theatre, amid a wave of social unrest in Chile, back in November 2019. Her priority was to connect the theater with the country’s circumstances to generate more content and closeness with its audiences. Today, the coronavirus represents a similar challenge: “how to make the theater stay alive and how to accompany people in this difficult and complex situation,” she explains.

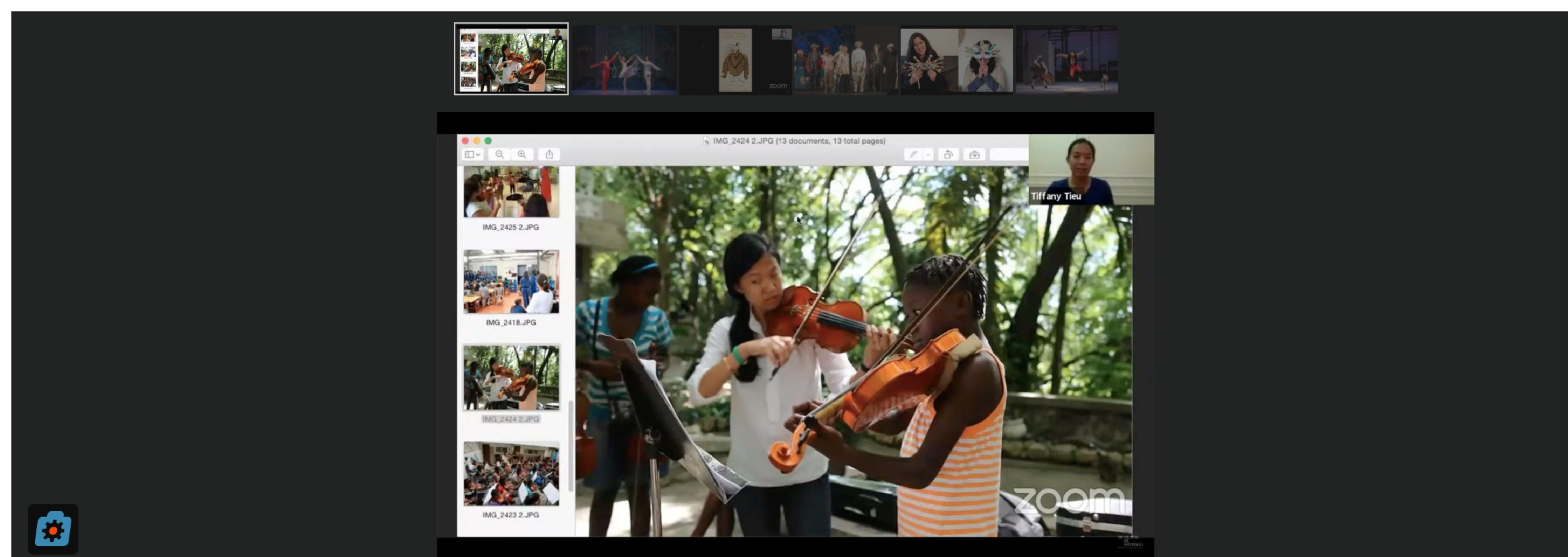


In response to the pandemic, both directors chose to design and make a digital billboard available. Carmen Gloria and her team created [Municipal Delivery](#), where they broadcast content three to four times a week; while María Victoria and her group created [#CultureAtHome](#) (#CulturaEnCasa, in Spanish) on Teatro Colón’s [webpage](#), which carries live broadcasts every Sunday night.

“This overriding need to keep in touch threw us into the arms of technology without hesitation. It has forced us to face the discussion of live versus digital and articulate it in novel ways. Today, it is super interesting to see how we can use these resources and continue taking advantage of them. For example, in Chile, the arts face geographic and economic barriers, and digital technology has allowed us to break them,” explains Carmen Gloria.

As of June 4, the Municipal Theater, through its platform, had held 27 virtual events with 261,860 attendees, including shows, talks and workshops. For its part, Teatro Colón calculates that all its content broadcast as of June 21 - which includes broadcasts of events, musicians from home and the historical audio archive - have garnered more than 1.5 million views.

Theaters in the south of the world have created not only live broadcasts, but a whole range of virtual products, from children’s workshops to conversations about Romanticism and its relationship with the works that are being presented. At Teatro Colón, they are even making protective masks: “We already have 15,000 masks and we will start making blankets,” says María Victoria. In addition to this, the Buenos Aires theater staff also supports their community by volunteering and providing logistical support at a hospital and a vaccination center, in addition to calling people over 70 to accompany them and help them with basic tasks.



Photos courtesy of the Teatro Municipal de Santiago

WOMEN’S POWER IN THE FACE OF THE CRISIS

Despite all the suffering that goes on in the four acts of Nabucco, the opera has a happy ending: the king of Babylon, after having lost everything, vindicates himself and triumphs. In Europe, some cultural venues have already started to host live performances, kindling hope in regions still facing restrictions. Through organizations such as Opera Latin America, a nonprofit that groups various theaters in the region, directors share experiences and knowledge with their peers from the Old Continent. Both María Victoria and Gloria have prepared reopening plans for when it becomes safe again for audiences to return.

In the region, however, the last act is not yet written. For now, the challenge has been to endure, which both directors have done, from the standpoint of female empowerment. “The conditions that women experience prepare us for these scenarios, to empathize with others, understand our fears, worries and anxieties, and get ahead,” says María Victoria.

Financial stability is key to the subsistence of cultural establishments in Latin America and the Caribbean, which today seek support to remain active. Despite the fact that most public resources are focused on the health emergency, efforts have been made to shore up cultural institutions.

In Chile, the Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Heritage has developed an [emergency plan](#), which includes support for theaters, and announced the distribution of approximately US\$17 million to support the sector. Argentina is allocating resources through the Develop Fund, which seeks to support the operational sustainability of cultural spaces; and the Points of Culture Program, within which the Podestá Plan stands out, focused on the operational preservation of Argentine casts, rooms and theaters.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) is also supporting governments to develop new tools and resources for the cultural and creative industries. “We are working so that organizations are not left out of public policies and together organizations (UNESCO, the Ibero-American General Secretariat, the Organization of Ibero-American States and Micsur Cultural), we are developing a report that measures the impact of COVID-19 in the sector and have created a group of experts to think together about designing policies that respond to these needs”, explains Trinidad Zaldívar, head of the organization’s Creativity and Culture Unit.

With [online learning’s increasing role](#) during the pandemic, the IDB also launched the first online course on creative economy, to strengthen the skills of the various members of the creative ecosystem and promote the interaction of public and private actors of this ecosystem in Latin America and the Caribbean.

“We continue to work, not only for the theater, but for all the professional women and managers who are in this solitary struggle, fighting against fire-spewing dragons,” says María Victoria.

Click on this link to learn more about the course [“The value of creativity and innovation: The Orange Economy.”](#)

Discover the [Orange Region podcast](#), to listen to stories about how the creative industries impact the economic and social development of the region.



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