

Dedication and Drive Earned Them Careers, but COVID Threatened Their Dreams Overnight

By A. E. Lee

2020 was looking promising for Marc Christopher. After weeks of auditions in January and February, he received a callback from a cruise line with good prospects of an offer to follow and received a contract offer from Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre in Lancaster, Pennsylvania for *Guys and Dolls* to reprise his lead role as Chicago gangster Big Jule from the previous year. With one contract signed and another potential offer, Marc was feeling good. Then, on March 12th, in response to the pandemic, Broadway abruptly closed all theaters until further notice. Unable to pay his New Jersey rent, Christopher moved in with his girlfriend in Albany, New York and applied for unemployment. He was able to secure a job scheduling COVID testing in the area, but until theatres reopen, his performing dream is on hold.

No one could have imagined the neon lights of Broadway going dark for 291 days (and counting.) With Broadway's reopening currently projected for May 30, 2021, it will have been over a year since closing. For the people who have made the performing arts their careers, who have dedicated years of their lives to mastering their craft, this shutdown is devastating. "When this pandemic happened, it was like, 'Well, what are you going to do now? You don't know how to do anything else... because this is what you've done all your life'," declared Darlene Myers, founding director of Myers Ballet School in Schenectady, New York.

For the thousands of artists who have dedicated years of their lives to honing their skills, working tirelessly booking jobs and building their careers, the shutdowns have caused a myriad of problems. Even those established artists with Broadway careers are finding themselves in trouble. Richard Gatta and spouse Carly Blake Sebouhian had careers to envy. Gatta was dance captain and swing (a performer who knows multiple roles and is ready to fill in last-minute) for the new Broadway show about Princess Diana, *Diana: A New Musical*, and Sebouhian has performed in *The Phantom of the Opera* for 17 years. The way Sebouhian saw it, the musical would provide work for the rest of her performing career. Then the unimaginable occurred: *The Phantom of the Opera*, the longest running show on Broadway, shut down overnight as part of the Broadway-wide closures.

Although their consistent work provided the couple with steady paychecks, health insurance, and pension plans, they soon found out that the stability they had worked so hard to secure would not be enough for the chaos of the coming months. When theatres closed, the couple was able to receive aid through unemployment. This is nothing new; actors like Gatta often receive unemployment for a month or two between their scheduled jobs. However, as a result of the prolonged shutdown, their health care coverage, provided by the Actor's Equity labor union for actors, is about to expire. With no employer or member contributions being made, the health insurance fund for Actor's Equity's 51,000 members is running out.

Along with the looming threat of insurance loss, Sebouhian is facing additional challenges because of the shutdown. As a member of *Phantom of the Opera*'s ballet corps, her role is extremely physically demanding. "There is no recreating the way my show feels on my body; we are in pointe shoes on a steel stage. When I am doing the show, even if I just take a week off to go on vacation, I come back, and it hurts. So, a year and a half [away from the stage] is gonna be hard."

The physical demands of pointe work require regular class attendance and time in the shoes most days of the week; many dancers rehearse 20 or more hours each week outside of their performances. Without constant use, the specific musculature is lost. "I don't even have pointe shoes. They're locked up at the theatre," sighs Sebouhian, so at-home pointe work is not even an option. Exercising at home helps but is not enough, especially as the shutdown continues.

The struggles of the shutdown are not exclusive to performers. Darlene Myers, founder of Myers Ballet School and founder and Artistic Director of Northeast Ballet Company in Schenectady, New York, has dedicated her life to the arts, more specifically, ballet. Myers started her school in 1985 and a few years later, her own company. When Broadway closed on March 12, Myers Ballet School announced a temporary closing until COVID cases died down. Myers lost her entire income overnight. With no incoming tuition and all foreseeable performance opportunities cancelled, her financial situation looked grim. "I was in such a panic...My 'Plan B' wasn't until five years from now. My income is the school." As the owner of Myers Ballet School, Myers' income is generated from tuition.

In an attempt to keep her school alive, Myers applied for and was granted, a [small business loan](#) through a [local fund](#) and a small business grant. Through Zoom classes, made possible by the loan and grant, she accrued some revenue while the studio underwent an overhaul in preparation for in-person classes. Even though in-person classes were allowed to begin in September, earning enough revenue is still a struggle under New York state's COVID guidelines. Social distance restrictions have cut class sizes in half; the largest spaces only accommodate 10 students per class. Additional cleanings are required to sanitize studios after each day of use, so to keep cleaning costs manageable, classes only meet every other day. Keeping the school alive is Myers' main concern at this time.

A career in the arts requires passion, dedication, and an ability to withstand rejection. When someone decides to pursue a life dedicated to the arts, they are more or less required to make sacrifices. They often leave behind family and friends, homes and steady jobs. Even before the COVID shutdown, New York City actor Marc Christopher's routine was demanding. As a non-equity actor, he woke up at 5 a.m. almost every day and stood in lines for hours to put his name on a list and hope for an audition slot. If there were several auditions that day, he ran from line to line around the theatre district of Manhattan, putting his name on as many lists as possible hoping for that one callback-- or even better, that one "Yes." In the evenings, he walked to West 44th street and 8th avenue where he sang as he served supper at Gayle's Broadway Rose, a restaurant featuring singing waiters. When not auditioning, he worked per diem as a registration

clerk in an emergency room. Why did he give up a dependable job registering incoming hospital patients for the uncertainty of an acting career? “Moving from a job that felt like work into a job that didn’t feel like work was really extraordinary and fun...it made me happy,” he explained.

Many companies, schools, and studios are desperately looking for new ways to keep arts alive in this trying and unsettling time. Employees of Gayle’s Broadway Rose, the cabaret-style restaurant in Manhattan’s theatre district where Marc Christopher worked, have performed via social media platforms in virtual cabarets throughout New York’s restaurant shutdown. These performances, free to stream, always include a donation option. Though generally small, all proceeds are distributed among the participating artists.

Richard Gatta, Broadway performer and dance captain, had an opportunity to participate in the Netflix filming of *Diana: A New Musical*. As a pandemic precaution, cast and crew members were quarantined in a hotel for 14 days before being allowed in the theatre. They were not allowed any travel or social interaction outside of their bubble. Quarantining and maintaining separation from outside contamination during dress rehearsals and filming allowed them to safely interact mask-free. In preparation for the filming, rehearsals were held virtually. “It’s definitely not the same as performing or rehearsing in the same space,” Gatta commented. For choreography rehearsals, cast members were isolated from one another in their homes watching the choreographer via Zoom, who cleaned up their steps and style virtually. Choreography via zoom “doesn’t really work that well,” Gatta said, “but it is a chance to get everybody on the same page.” Yet Gatta remains optimistic, “It’s a way to keep the arts going and keep creating in a time when we can’t be together.”

Despite attempts being made to keep the performing arts alive, performers and directors confess that the lack of live performing opportunities is taking its toll. Christopher declared, “I would give anything right now to go wait in line at 5 a.m. at Pearl Studios, to audition, to get a ‘No.’ I will wear a hot dog suit just so I can perform.” Sebouhian admitted to exploring alternate job options to simply fill her time while waiting for *Phantom of the Opera* to reopen, but then confided that actually taking a job with no defined end date and therefore committing to “...not being available [if and when *Phantom* reopens] is a hard decision to make. I’ve definitely thought about it,” she mused, “I’m borderline. I feel like I’m just sitting here wasting my life away a little bit.”

Reopening artistic outlets could provide a source of healing, diversion, and hope for artists and non-artists alike who have struggled through the isolation of this pandemic. Henry Timms, president of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, summed up the importance of art quite concisely in this interview in [The Washington Post](#), “...The arts in general have a critical place in terms of recovering from the pandemic, and the really interesting challenge for the arts — when we are seeing some of the worst of ourselves — is that the arts represents the best of ourselves. The job of the arts is to be part of that human recovery.”