Tens of thousands of jobs lost in film, performing arts in the US due to pandemic

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The US ruling elite has permitted more than one million people to die—and millions more to be permanently damaged—in an entirely preventable pandemic, all in the interest of protecting corporate profits and a rising stock market. A handful of oligarchs has raked in billions, the WSWS has explained time and again, while vast numbers have died.

Why should this same elite blink at the damage done to artists and cultural life?

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) released data March 15 providing some indication of the ongoing impact of the pandemic, which, in fact, now merges in 2023 with an economic slowdown.

The Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account (ACPSA) tracks the annual economic value of arts and cultural production from 35 industries—including both commercial and nonprofit entities.

The ACPSA figures cover 2021, the last year for which complete statistics are available.

After the collapse of 2020, the various arts industries experienced a significant recovery the following year. However, while the total economic value added by arts and cultural industries (according to NEA and BEA calculations) grew by 13.7 percent from 2020 to 2021, "several core arts industries did not return to pre-pandemic production levels." This group includes some of the most vulnerable sectors: independent artists, performing arts organizations (theater, dance and opera companies, music groups) and fine arts education.

The APSCA numbers indicate that despite the 2021 recovery, 300,000 fewer workers were employed that year in the US in the arts and cultural industries than in pre-pandemic 2019—4.9 million as opposed to 5.2 million.

The motion picture industry witnessed the sharpest gains in 2021, after the disaster of the previous year, experiencing a 23 percent increase in employment. But this still meant an overall drop of nearly 60,000 workers, from 394,000 in 2019 to 326,000 in 2021.

The numerous performing-arts industries continue to be especially hard-hit (more on this below) for fairly obvious reasons. While employment in that field grew by 14.4 percent in 2021, it only employed 230,000 workers against 323,000 in 2019, a 29 percent decline (nearly 90,000 jobs lost). Employment in performing arts organizations per se fell by 33 percent during the same period.

Data provided by researcher IMPACTS Experience, "Projected Attendance to US Cultural Entities," points to the enduring problems faced by "performance-based entities."

The research outfit estimates that in 2022 theaters, orchestras, symphonies and ballets "averaged 80.8% of 2019 attendance." There are no indications this will improve substantially this year. As of January 2023, "the current market potential for performance-based organizations for the calendar year 2023 is 82.7% of their 2019 attendance."

This translates into a loss of billions of dollars in revenue spread across the thousands of performing arts organizations, which are no longer receiving federal pandemic assistance.

The difficulties for the performing arts are due in large part "to the perceived increased health risks associated with indoor environments that are often associated with a performing arts experience. In fact, current projections suggest that performing arts organizations will not reach actual 2019 levels industry-wide for the near-term foreseeable future."

According to IMPACTS Experience data, there remains, understandably, a "redistribution of demand away from stationary, indoor activities towards outdoor activities or those that allow for freedom of movement." This redistribution "still dramatically benefits parks, gardens, zoos, aquariums, and some museums" at the expense of other indoor events. "Even as we all begin to recover from the pandemic, we still see that certain preferences developed over the past few years are proving durable."

Moreover, while theater audiences "can vary substantially based upon the offered programs," IMPACTS Experience points to the quasi-permanent decline in "the historic audiences for symphonies/orchestras and other performing arts institutions." They are experiencing what the researchers term "negative substitution of the historic visitor," i.e., the number of people "leaving the market" outpaces the number "entering" it. "In short," the study suggests, "core audiences are aging and not being replaced by a younger and more diverse generation at a pace that allows for stable market potential."

Various local news accounts confirm the downturn in the performing arts in particular. A *Denver Gazette* article, "Colorado arts attendance may never fully recover from pandemic shutdown," reports that the "pandemic shutdown was just the beginning of a nightmare that Colorado's arts organizations are only slowly waking up from."

"Attendance at cultural events," the piece goes on, "especially indoor events like plays, films and museums, is getting better—but has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. And it is increasingly beginning to look like it never will."

In line with the national figures, the president and CEO of the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities, in the Denver area, reports "seeing 80% of pre-pandemic attendance … We're projecting 82% for fiscal year 2022-23—and the trendline looks to be flattening."

The *Gazette* comments that the arts center's goal "is to one day build back to 85%—and then think of that as the new normal. The question is: How many arts organizations might be able to survive if 85% becomes the new normal?"

The online newspaper's analysis of attendance data "from across a swath of Colorado arts organizations shows that 2022 attendance was commonly down between 20 and 50% from comparable pre-pandemic periods."

The figures in California tell the same overall story. The *Art Newspaper* (in "Visual and performing artists have struggled to recover from the pandemic, analysis of California's creative economy shows") points out that while the state's large "creative industry" as a whole "had a healthy economic recovery in 2021," the performing arts sector "was the hardest hit by the pandemic and is struggling to regain footing."

Employment levels in the performing arts saw "steep declines" in 2020, with the loss of 17 percent of jobs in California and 12 percent in Los Angeles County. "In 2021, employment remains 'well below' pre-pandemic levels," according to the authoritative Otis College of Art and Design's latest annual report.

Workers in California's fine and performing arts sector, according to the same study, "also earned the lowest wages on average, earning about $45,000 annually in 2021. And wages grew at the slowest rate, at 5.1. In comparison, workers in the entertainment sector earned average wages of $199,277 and had the highest wage growth, 36.4%, between 2018 and 2021."

A good deal of water has flowed under the bridge since 2018, but that year a survey conducted by the Creative Independent found that US visual artists' median income was $20,000-$30,000 a year, with almost 60 percent reporting making less than $30,000 annually. There is every reason to believe that the general situation has only deteriorated.