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The Pleasures and Perils of Outdoor Performances

In summer, audiences have the chance to enjoy theater and music in the open air—as long as it doesn't rain and the gnats aren't feasting.



An audience watches a performance of Shakespeare at the Seabreeze Amphitheater in Jupiter, Fla., 2018 PHOTO: RICHARD GRAULICH/THE PALM BEACH POST/ZUMA PRESS

By Terry Teachout

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From Tanglewood to the Hollywood Bowl, summertime means outdoor performances of every kind, including classical concerts, opera, dance and, most often, theater. I've reviewed them all, and some of my happiest memories are of the countless shows I've seen under the stars. On the other hand, I also remember a few that I would have paid not to see, usually because Mother Nature chose not to cooperate. Yes, it's festive and fun to eat a picnic dinner and then stroll to Shakespeare in the Park. But if the sky falls, the show stops—unless the performers are protected by a tent or canopy, in which case it may simply be paused, leaving the audience soaked to the skin by evening's end. Mere skull-busting heat is rarely considered sufficient reason to send a paying crowd home, and I've covered plenty of performances where gnats were out in force, flying in funnel-cloud formation with orders to kill.

Another common problem is the scale of outdoor venues. If you're seated too far from a stage, you'll feel out of touch with the artists who are performing on it. This is especially true when the art form doesn't normally make use of electronic amplification, as is the case with classical music and theater. Carnegie Hall, which has 2,800 seats, is big but not mammoth, whereas the 3,800-seat Metropolitan Opera House places most of the audience too far away from the action for comfort. Now consider the Hollywood Bowl, which seats 17,500. It's been amplifying symphonic concerts since 1936, and though sound-design technology has improved greatly in recent years, it's still disorienting to attend a concert where you can hear the musicians but not quite see them.

Can such performances work anyway? One of the most exciting classical concerts I've ever heard took place in 2003 on the Great Lawn of New York's Central Park, where the jazz singer Luciana Souza and the New York Philharmonic performed Manuel de Falla's "El amor brujo" in front of 50,000 listeners. Not only was the amplification serviceable, but the backdrop enhanced the experience: The skyline of midtown Manhattan bounced light off the low-lying clouds, with the Chrysler Building peeping between the high-rises on Central Park South. The management even shot off fireworks after the show! On the other hand, I had a press seat, which put me far closer to the stage than the vast majority of my fellow music lovers. I simply can't imagine getting much aesthetic pleasure from sitting all the way at the back of a 50,000-seat "concert hall."

Theatrical performances are—or can be—different. I've enjoyed shows presented in outdoor spaces ranging in size from the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's 540-seat tent to the 11,000-seat amphitheater where the Muny in St. Louis revived "Jerome Robbins' Broadway" to galvanizing effect earlier this summer. By comparison, most regional theaters hold no more than 350 people, while Broadway theaters seat between 600 and 2,000.

The bigger the space, the harder it is to make a small show work, but it can be done. This is particularly true of dance. I've seen the Paul Taylor Dance Company command the attention of a crowd of 3,000 in Lincoln Center's Guggenheim Bandshell with Mr. Taylor's "Esplanade," which uses just nine dancers.

Yet another possible pitfall is that the natural beauty of an outdoor setting can sometimes swamp a show. The tent for the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, for instance, is pitched on a green lawn near the edge of a bluff overlooking the Hudson River. The eye-catching spectacle of the water below and the mountains beyond can be dangerously distracting. Still, any theatrical production will overwhelm you if it's imaginative enough, and once the sun sets, the stage soon becomes your only world. It's even possible to create a feeling of intimacy under such circumstances, as was the case with Eric Tucker's 2015 Hudson Valley staging of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," in which five actors dressed in dirt-cheap costumes held the crowd spellbound without benefit of set or props. All they had was themselves—and, needless to say, Shakespeare.