

A pandemic-era lesson?

Same holiday show will stream in Chicago, Kansas and Montana



“Eleanor’s Very Merry Christmas Wish — The Musical” in its world premiere at the Greenhouse Theater Center in Chicago in 2019. (Matt Ferguson photo)

CHRIS JONES

In 2019, a Chicago producer and live-event specialist named Denise McGowan Tracy staged a self-authored holiday show at the Greenhouse Theater Center. The kid-centered production, “Eleanor’s Merry Christmas Wish — The Musical,” played in a theater seating 175 people. It struggled to compete with many other long-established holiday shows in Chicago. The holiday season traditionally is very lucrative but it’s also highly competitive.

For this year, “Eleanor” has returned and expanded her reach. Big time.

She is also on the 2020 holiday docket at the McCain Auditorium in Manhattan, Kan., the Mother Lode Theatre in Butte, Mont., the Appell Center in York, Penn., the Weill Center in Sheboygan, Wis., and many other locales from Texas to Maine.

How is this possible? Are Eleanor and her friends hitting the road? No. What McGowan Tracy has done is to take a filmed version of last year's show — recorded at the Greenhouse Theater Center — and created an online package to sell this year. The idea is that product-starved arts centers can then offer their subscribers this holiday attraction as, in essence, one of their own creations. It's a win-win-win in that McGowan Tracy gets to sell her show all across the country, the pandemic-stricken arts centers get a cut of the box office without incurring many expenses, and the actors and crew get paid all over again just when they need the cash.

McGowan Tracy also has been shrewd enough to realize that she has to offer a bit more than something already in the can, now newly arriving on a laptop near you. So her 2020 offering includes “new appearances from the cast, additional holiday music, as well as the recorded 2019 performance.” You can also get stuff sent to your door to go along with the show.

She is hardly alone with this approach to pandemic touring. The Chicago-based Manual Cinema, for example, is selling its upcoming new production of “Manual Cinema's Christmas Carol” through (among many others) the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts in Urbana, as well as Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville and even, confusingly, Writers Theatre in Glencoe, which is packaging Manual Cinema as part of a holiday twofer with its own “One-Man A Christmas Carol.” If you're on the Writers website, it looks the same as one of their shows, and you can buy tickets through the Writers box office.

As it happens, you can also buy your tickets directly from Manual Cinema, which (unlike the “Eleanor” musical) will be creating its show live every night in its own Chicago studio.

Presumably, people will make their choice based on which institution they want to support. Many of the cities on Manual Cinema's list are venues to which the innovative company typically has toured in the past, and where its innovative style of theater already is known. It's also a way for Manual Cinema, a [bright spark in the Chicago arts](#) economy, to stay in the public eye while many theaters are shuttered.

The strange part of all this, of course, is that theaters are used to being essentially local operations. In normal times, the Krannert Center, say, often books international artists to come to the campus of the University of Illinois. But once they arrive, they aren't competing with another booking at an arts center down the street on the same night. The Krannert Center has at least a temporary monopoly.

Those were the old rules.

In the COVID-19 virtual world, all online offerings compete for audiences with all online offerings all over the country, if not the world at pretty much all times. This has horrified many local performing arts institutions for good reason, especially since the few staffers with ongoing jobs need to look like they are actually doing something.

But you can also see this as an opportunity.

The producer Seth Greenleaf thinks so. He's one of the forces behind Overture, a new streaming platform that he says can "revolutionize" how producers and presenters share content. In a recent telephone interview, Greenleaf said he had already signed streaming deals with The Second City, as well as actual shows like Jake Ehrenreich's "A Jew Grows in Brooklyn" or "Middletown," a commercial production that was [doing well at the Apollo Theater](#) in Chicago before it was felled by the pandemic closures.

Greenleaf argues that the idea of protecting content is dated, even before the pandemic. "Releasing a cast recording doesn't diminish interest in a musical, it increases interest," he said.

Much the same reluctance, of course, used to exist in the world of sports, where it was long believed that live broadcasting of games would impact in-person attendance. It was a worry that proved unfounded.

The model behind Overture is much the same as the one for "Eleanor": presenting partners are free to put the show in their "skin," as it were, just as if the act were walking through the door in Rockford or wherever. Revenue is shared between producer and presenter. And it's a lot less work than creating your own shows.

It works at Aldi and Trader Joe's, where producers of food let the stores have the branding in return for the order.

Maybe this approach can help buffer the performing arts in the middle of a pandemic. Just as long as every arts center in every town doesn't end up with exactly the same season.

"Eleanor's Merry Christmas Wish — The Musical" will stream via InPlayer Nov. 27 to Dec. 27; tickets \$25-\$85 at www.eleanorwish.com.

"Manual Cinema's Christmas Carol" will stream Dec. 3-20; tickets \$15-\$100 at manualcinema.com or as part of "Two Scrooges" at www.writerstheatre.org.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

cjones5@chicagotribune.com