

Balancing Act: 5 Tips to Succeed in the Hybrid Theater Model

4 MIN READ



By: John Finn

In case you're wondering, there's still nothing like it.

After well over a year, I was back in a theatre for the first time and it was glorious. In spite of the many valiant efforts during lockdown here in the UK to find other channels to get my 'fix,' nothing else compares.

The event I attended was a very well managed socially distanced show. Temperature checks were in place, phased entry times, mask wearing and staff members were clearly well prepared. There was plenty of signage in the venue to communicate the protocols, distancing and sanitary measures without being too 'in your face.' In short, it felt safe. (In fact, much safer than the few shops I've ventured into recently.)

But, I do have one gripe – and it's a big one.

The performance was being recorded (not live streamed) by a full on film production crew including a large crane camera, which is something that we're likely to see more and more of as venues reopen. Presumably after much planning, the filming had resulted in a number of customers being re-seated – including me. Not pleasant for the venue staff to do normally, when the better seats are long gone, but imagine having to manage social distancing (and the pent up emotions of COVID deprived ballet aficionados in play) on top of that. No easy task.

Which brings me to my point. In our industry, we talk a lot (pretty much endlessly) about putting customers first, developing long term relationships and perfecting the customer journey. These first audiences will no doubt be FULL of those key, engaged, highly loyal people we claim to value so much.

My personal experience, however, was that the needs of the future digital audience took precedence over those of us who had set aside our concerns, followed our passion and ventured to the venue to show our support.

So what did I learn from this experience?

Re-opening is going to be a challenging time, in many ways, and we need to tread carefully. I think most people accept that the 'new normal' is going to be formed by a blend of content consumers. It's also true that our cultural institutions will need to balance these different needs to maximize their sustainability.

Like most things in life, the key is balance. Here are my tips for venues to help them find it:

1. Cherish your loyal audience! They will be the first across the threshold when you reopen – don't lose sight of them or take them for granted.
2. Remember that the 'in-person' experience is why you exist – make sure it's pre-eminent.
3. Think about how you create digital content and make sure it's not created at the expense of the 'live' experience. If possible, steer clear of filming public performances unless it's a live stream or...
4. Consider clearly sign posting filmed performances in advance and, where possible, price and seat flexibly (use GA, single price tickets).
5. Find ways to make those who attend feel part of the digital show by building them into your plans. It can be as simple as letting them see the end product free of charge or including them in your thanks on the credit reel.

Despite my gripe, I want to finish on a positive note. I want to thank the ballet, the orchestra and the venue staff. It was wonderful. It felt new and exciting, but at the same time like greeting an old friend. It was like a cool drink after crossing the desert. Thank you.

Interested in more insight into the reopening of venues? [Click here](#) to explore more content.