

## **An Open Letter from the Metro Atlanta Arts Community in the Wake of the Lyric's Closing**

On Tuesday, March 7th, we were devastated to hear that the Atlanta Lyric Theatre has shut down after 42 seasons. Not only is its closing a loss for our vibrant industry, it is also an indicator that if left unchecked, the crisis in the theatre and arts sectors caused by the COVID-19 shutdowns will continue to ravage our community.

Atlanta is a great theatre city, unique from any other in the nation. Its theatrical ecosystem encompasses small entrepreneurial companies led by exciting young artists, a vibrant community of midsized theatres who specialize in creating programming that reflects the community in and around Atlanta, and large theatres nationally recognized as hot spots for producing new plays and Broadway tryouts. Through it all runs an entrepreneurial spirit, a commitment to new work, and the will to broaden audiences and expand what it means to be an artist, a southerner or even a person.

Our local theatre is a remarkable opportunity to hone the craft of artists. Steve Yockey, Danielle Deadwyler, Jennifer Garner, Donald Glover, Amy Adams, Julia Roberts, RuPaul, and Kenny Leon, among many more, started their careers on and around Metro Atlanta stages. It is this commitment to finding and supporting local southern talent that makes the theatre industry so vibrant and allows us to provide the strong foundation that the TV and film industry have built upon so spectacularly. Marvel Studios, Tyler Perry Studios, and Netflix have all found a home here in and around Atlanta, in large part due to generous funding via tax breaks that they receive from the Georgia government but also because of the talent the local theatre cultivates year after year.

Our theatre community's vibrancy is mirrored across the city's non profit arts sector. Anywhere you look in Metro Atlanta you will find dancers, singers, musicians and visual artists creating and defining a new cultural vocabulary that is unique to our metro. Beyond the creativity and joy this industry brings to our city it is also an economic and job creating power house. The Atlanta Regional Commission in 2017 estimated that the non profit arts sector on its own was a \$719.8 million dollar industry that supported more than [23,000 full time jobs](#) across the city, more than Home Depot, Piedmont Health Care or Publix, and that the Atlanta arts community contributes more than \$65 million to local and state government revenue through taxes every year. The economic impact of patrons who attend arts programming is even greater. Each patron spends between \$23 and \$48 every time they attend an event, almost all of which is spent at local businesses. In 2015 the Arts and Economic prosperity report estimated that the combined impact of the non profit arts sector and the patrons who attended events was

more than [\\$600 million dollars](#) in Metro Atlanta. This remarkable impact is in addition to the immeasurable cultural enrichment that theaters and arts venues provide to their communities, especially to students whose schools rely on theaters and cultural institutions across Atlanta to curate artistic programming that inspires children to dream, explore and reach for something new through art.

**Arts and theatre companies across the country are at an inflection point. Now is the time to act to ensure theatre and the arts stay at the center of Metro Atlanta communities.**

COVID-19 was the biggest disruption to the American Arts sector in history, and the most destructive since the Great Depression. And it is still threatening our industry. From the increased costs we have all seen since returning to work, audience members' ongoing health concerns, and rolling shutdowns as company members test positive for COVID-19, the industry is still in turmoil. Because of this turmoil, nationwide only about half of pre-pandemic audiences have returned – severely limiting earned revenue as the industry rebuilds its audience base.

Coupling lower than average attendance with the fact that arts funding is the smallest fraction of philanthropic giving means that there are simply not enough resources available for the short term health and long term viability of the Metro Atlanta cultural arts community. Unfortunately, the challenge has been exacerbated post pandemic as community funders and foundation leaders who previously funded the arts have significantly delayed releasing funds, have not focused on the arts during the pandemic and recovery or have ended their arts support altogether. Midsize and small companies are even more challenged by the current funding landscape because they are less able to navigate disruption in funding.

*We propose a five-pronged approach to fundamentally change how arts and culture are supported in the city and move the industry forward not based on scarcity but instead on a model designed to let the arts thrive as a core value of our city and state.*

**First, we will ask major philanthropic foundations and area philanthropists to make a transformational, one-time gift to every arts organization in Metro Atlanta.** In cities across the United States individual philanthropists and foundations have realized that now is the time to act to stabilize local communities of arts organizations. We need that leadership in Atlanta.

**Second, we will propose doubling the grant making capacity of the city, county, and state arts offices across the metro while simultaneously cutting red tape so that awarded funds can be accessed quickly.** According to ArtsATL, Georgia still ranks near the bottom of arts funding, ranking 49th out of all states. By adding less than 10 million dollars combined across all state, county and city budgets to the grant funding arm of arts agencies local organizations would have more consistent funding available, more organizations could receive funding and funding levels could be increased. This deeper investment is a win-win, funding provided to local arts companies comes back to the granting government agencies by a factor of at least 3 to 1.

**Third, we will ask the Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta to hire an arts program director quickly and give that person adequate staff and resources to develop new artistic resources from national funders, not just shepard existing funds.** For too long the arts have been relegated to an underfunded and understaffed department at the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta and at foundations across the city. To change the system we need a metro wide advocate who is active in the national philanthropic community while also being committed to a thriving local arts scene.

**Fourth, we will ask that the production tax credit enjoyed by the film and television industry be extended to non profit arts organizations headquartered and producing live performing arts productions in Georgia.** Without us providing the training and year round opportunities, the film industry would not have the access to talent they so rightfully enjoy. By extending the tax credit to work produced on the stages across the state we will create a more holistic ecosystem.

**Fifth, we will call upon production and media companies based in Georgia to join us as we advocate for increased arts funding while simultaneously creating deeper working relationships between for-profit and nonprofit arts organizations.** Strengthening the symbiotic relationship between the film and media industry and local artists will ensure that both thrive.

*How can you help as a patron:*

**If you have not attended since the shut down, come back, we need you.** Ticket sales are vital to our health but so is word of mouth marketing and engaged audiences. If you can't afford a ticket please ask about discounts and special codes. Nearly every company in town has special performances and admissions that are discounted to ensure anyone who wants to can get in. We are all trying to keep our ticket prices low to

remain accessible to the greatest number of people possible, even in the face of inflation and rising costs.

**If you're someone who can afford a little more, consider adding a donation each time you purchase tickets so that we can continue paying artists fairly.** Consider joining the thousands of people who have donated time and money to the arts throughout the shutdown and recovery. Without the remarkable support of donors large and small the arts would not have survived, we thank you for all that you have done for the industry.

**If you have been coming, tell your friends and family about the work you see on stage.** Advocate for the arts at your company, post to your social media accounts and bring up the last show you saw when you are out with friends. The best marketing we have is word of mouth — and we need you to get the word out.

**Discover new theatres. Explore a new genre.** With more than 30 theaters and hundreds of arts companies in the city there are likely at least a dozen you have not attended, or a genre you have not seen recently. From puppets to improv and from Shakespeare to world premiere new works, you can find anything on stage in Atlanta. Not to mention choral music, modern dance, indie movies and lectures by famous artists.

*What we promise:*

**With your support we will continue to produce work fueled by our community.** Queer youth, a woman struggling with mental health, black entrepreneurs, and young women seeking a closer relationship with God were all portrayed onstage last weekend across Atlanta stages and we pledge to continue to represent this city and all the facets that make it great.

**We commit to amplifying exciting new voices and showcasing remarkable, diverse talent that reflects our region.** The Metro Atlanta arts community's ability to nurture rising talent on local stages before launching it onto the national stage means that our next generation of tastemakers will have deep ties to Georgia.

**And we promise to continue bringing our community together.** To entertain, to explore and to sit a while in another world, in another person's truth, and maybe become just a little closer.

Your help is critical to our future, but together we can only go so far. We need community funders, philanthropic leaders, and political leaders to join us. With their support, we can chart a new path forward for the arts in Atlanta by seizing the opportunity presented during this challenging time and to rewrite the way arts and culture are funded and supported. If we can accomplish even a fraction of what we propose here, we can write a new future for the arts in Atlanta and Georgia, solidifying our status as a center for arts and culture in America.

**If you are interested in signing on to support this work**, email [marysa@actorexpress.com](mailto:marysa@actorexpress.com).

**If you are a funder** interested in talking about how to make a transformative gift in the sector, please contact [alex@actorexpress.com](mailto:alex@actorexpress.com), [csa@truecolorstheatre.org](mailto:csa@truecolorstheatre.org), or [mack@7stages.org](mailto:mack@7stages.org).

**If you are a government leader** or can help advance the ideas around an arts tax credit or in creating local funding for the arts email [stacey@dadsgarage.com](mailto:stacey@dadsgarage.com) or [marysa@actorexpress.com](mailto:marysa@actorexpress.com) or [lisa@horizontheatre.com](mailto:lisa@horizontheatre.com).

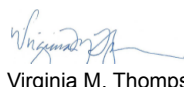
**If you are a patron and want to make a donation** or attend a performance please visit the website of any of the cosigned companies.

If you have other ideas on how we can advance the arts in Atlanta or the state or Georgia, email [alex@actorexpress.com](mailto:alex@actorexpress.com).

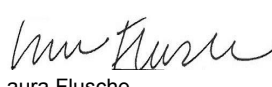
Thank you from all of us in the Metro Atlanta Arts Community.



Freddie Ashley  
Artistic Director  
[Actor's Express](http://Actor's Express)



Virginia M. Thompson  
Executive Director  
[Atlanta Young Singer](http://Atlanta Young Singer)



Laura Flusche  
Executive Director  
[Museum of Design Atlanta \(MODA\)](http://Museum of Design Atlanta (MODA))



Justin Ball  
Producing Artistic Director  
[Stage Door Theatre](http://Stage Door Theatre)



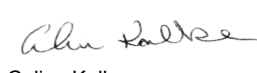
Alexander Scollon  
Managing Director  
[Actor's Express](http://Actor's Express)



Nena Gilreath  
Co-Founding Director  
[Ballethnic](http://Ballethnic)



Laura Flusche  
Executive Director  
[Museum of Design Atlanta \(MODA\)](http://Museum of Design Atlanta (MODA))



Celise Kalke  
Managing Director  
[Synchronicity Theatre](http://Synchronicity Theatre)



Marysa Sutton  
Associate Managing Director  
[Actor's Express](http://Actor's Express)



Stacy Sharer  
Managing Director  
[Dad's Garage Theatre](http://Dad's Garage Theatre)



Stephanie Owens  
Executive Director  
[National Black Arts Festival](http://National Black Arts Festival)



Rachel May,  
Co-Founder & Producing  
Artistic Director,

[Synchronicity Theatre](#)



Christopher Escobar  
Executive Director  
[Atlanta Film Society](#)



Tim Stoltenberg,  
Artistic Director,  
[Dad's Garage Theatre](#)



Mack Headrick  
Managing Director  
[7 Stages](#)



Carolyn Cook  
Producing Artistic Director,  
[Théâtre du Rêve](#)



Mike Schleifer  
Managing Director  
[Alliance Theatre](#)



Angela Harris  
Executive Director  
[Dance Canvas](#)



Heidi Howard  
Artistic Director  
[7 Stages](#)



Vanya Foote  
Managing Director  
[Theatrical Outfit](#)



Christopher Moses  
Dan Reardon Director of  
Education / Associate Artistic  
Director  
[Alliance Theatre](#)



Anita Farley  
Artistic Director  
[Georgia Ensemble Theatre](#)



Jeff Watkins  
Artistic Director  
[The Atlanta Shakespeare  
Company at The  
Shakespeare Tavern  
Playhouse](#)



Chandra Stephens-Albright  
Managing Director  
[True Colors Theatre  
Company](#)



Marguerite Mancini  
Managing Director  
[Atlanta Film Society](#)



Lisa Adler  
Co-Founder and  
Co-Artistic/Producing  
Director,  
[Horizon Theatre Company](#)



Jennifer Bauer-Lyons  
Executive Director  
[South Fulton Institute](#)



Emily Reily Russell Managing  
Director  
[Whole World Improv Theatr](#)