

SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA

2021

PRESS RELEASE

The 2021 Festival season reinvigorates artists and audience members alike, heralds excitement to come in 2022.

With full houses and critically acclaimed performances, Spoleto's 2021 season was a success.

June 16, 2021 (Charleston, South Carolina) — Ushering a jubilant return to live performance, Spoleto Festival USA's 45th season was marked by change, big names, and bold ideas. "I am proud of my staff's commitment to making this season a reality," says General Director Nigel Redden. "While it may have differed from our original hopes in terms of scale, I am immeasurably pleased with our outcome."

The host of this season's most sweeping changes were precautions taken in an effort to stem the spread of Covid-19. With 74 in-person performances taking place over the 17 days, Spoleto occupied just four venues throughout Charleston, compared to its usual 10. Ticket holders were physically distanced in the performance spaces, and overall capacity was roughly 25-percent of a typical season. Still, the 2021 season proved to be no less impactful to artists, audiences, and to Charleston itself. For its 45th year, Spoleto engaged about 90 seasonal employees and 23 apprentices, sold roughly 15,400 tickets for a sales total of \$817,000, and visited several area schools—virtually and in person. The Festival embarked in new virtual territories, offering two theatrical productions that were created for remote audiences, and built an entirely new venue—a beautiful amphitheater on the College of Charleston campus.

After a full year of empty stages and dark theaters, Spoleto once again fulfilled its mission, providing emerging artists the opportunity to work alongside established masters in their field. Among the 101 performing artists presented on Spoleto stages, big names—like Jason Moran, Alisa Weilerstein, Toshi Reagon, and Isabella Boylston—as well as up-and-comers were delighted by the ability to appear in front of a live audience. Maura Hogan of *The Post and Courier* wrote of their gratitude: "All of the artists I took in over the weekend were quick to impart that it was their first time performing together since the pandemic lockdown. And the audience was there every euphoric step of the way." She continued: "If an overarching theme has emerged, it is reemergence—that of both artists and audiences."

Jumpstarting the 2021 season was a star-studded tribute to Redden's tenure at Spoleto before he retires later this fall. Hosted by countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, the virtual gala on May 22 celebrated

Redden’s artistic vision and supportive spirit. Pioneers in performing arts, such as Meredith Monk, Steve Reich, and Laurie Anderson, contributed short performances as well as messages to the outgoing director that included notes of gratitude and reminiscences of shared experiences. Illustrious director/choreographer Bill T. Jones remarked on their friendship: “What has been the greatest reward in knowing you all these years, my friend, is that you actually are a loyal friend. And you have been that to me as an artist and as a man.” The evening also raised funds for the Nigel Redden Emerging Artist Endowment—to date, more than \$255,000 has been earmarked for Redden’s successor to aid in future programming and support young artists for future seasons. While a successor has yet to be named, Spoleto’s transition committee has been interviewing candidates and will announce the new director this fall.

Following a brief press conference to open the season on May 28, the Festival’s first weekend saw the exciting start of *The Woman in Black*, the famous ghost play that has been running in London’s West End for 30 years. While the play had been planned for a new stage at the Charleston Visitor Center Bus Shed, traffic re-routes and the possibility of noise pollution moved the piece indoors for its complete run at Festival Hall. For 15 nearly sold-out performances (one evening was cancelled due to flooding), audience members trembled and jumped at each blood-curdling scream and surprise twist.

The 2021 dance series also kicked off opening weekend, presenting Caleb Teicher & Company, a fast-rising tap-meets-swing-dance troupe from New York City, at the new outdoor stage on Rivers Green. Describes *Charleston City Paper*: “The outdoor stage and rows of ample, well-spaced seating have been brilliantly nestled in the courtyard behind the College of Charleston Addlestone Library. Flanked by faux-brick columns and walls fabricated by the festival’s set shop, the stage and seating look as if they’ve always been there and had been artfully designed just for this space...it felt like Spoleto was truly infusing the city and her streets with art.” The company, which brought two works—*Meet Ella* and *Bzzzzz*—received ample acclaim itself: “By the end of the hour, the giddy, ecstatic mix of technical excellence, coupled with an ever-present striking spiritual ease, is nothing short of revelatory” (*The Post and Courier*). Biblical proportions of rain and thunderstorms (inevitable in June in the Lowcountry) cancelled one performance each of the programs Ballet Under the Stars and Ephrat Asherie Dance, yet the positive reviews—like *Charleston City Paper*’s description Asherie’s *Odeon* as “a magnificent celebration of movement and art”—and nightly standing ovations signaled both as a success.

The Wells Fargo Jazz series, held in the picturesque College of Charleston Cistern Yard began with two New Orleans-focused concerts, stages jam-packed with master musicians. Performing to sold-out audiences, the artists of Preservation Hall Jazz Band and A New Orleans Jazz Celebration “were limitless in energy,” reviewed *The Post and Courier*. Supergroup The Cookers also offered “incendiary

performances” (*JazzTimes*), with the elder instrumentalists firing off virtuosic solos while also “showcasing the group’s effortless unity and commitment to innovation” (*The Post and Courier*). Jason Moran and Alicia Hall Moran’s concert event *Two Wings: The Music of Black America in Migration* closed out the series on June 11 to an audience of more than 650. A true pinnacle of the season that gathered 17 disparate musicians—from jazz vocalist Sharon Clark and trombonist Wycliffe Gordon to the classically-focused Imani Winds woodwind ensemble and folk artist Toshi Reagon—*Two Wings*, “was a celebration of the diverse array of artists on the stage, and the varied paths that brought them there” (*The Post and Courier*).

The College of Charleston Cistern Yard also served as the backdrop for the popular First Citizens Bank Front Row—this year a six-concert series featuring three Americana, folk, and bluegrass ensembles: Sarah Jarosz, Steep Canyon Rangers, and The Wood Brothers. For all groups, Spoleto Festival USA was among their first few gigs since the pandemic lockdown.

Director of Chamber Music Geoff Nuttall similarly noted that for most of the musicians on his program—the Chamber Music series at the Dock Street Theatre—playing in Charleston was their first foray back into live performance. Though audiences were reduced due to Covid-19-necessary limited capacities, Spoleto’s bedrock program seemed unaltered. *The Post and Courier* put it this way: “Looking at this year’s chamber music program as a whole, there is a familiar ring of Artistic Director Geoff Nuttall’s tried and true formula for success: something old, something new, a bit of borrowing from non-chamber repertoire, all presented in an unpretentious and joyful package.” Over the course of 33 concerts, Nuttall and 16 additional world-class instrumentalists performed a broad spectrum of repertory—from the familiar to the unexplored to the brand-new. Four world premieres plus two new arrangements punctuated the series. And for the many chamber music enthusiasts who were unable to get tickets inside the theater (there were only 116 seats), the Festival made history by videotaping each concert and sharing highlights on its YouTube Channel, which are available through June 18, 2021. These videos, which to date have garnered more than 3,900 views, were also designed to accompany the decades-long tradition of South Carolina Public Radio’s broadcasts of the concerts. Beginning June 4, each of the 11 programs aired on the weekday program “Sonatas and Soundscapes,” and excerpts were featured on its biweekly podcast *Spoletto Backstage*.

The chamber music videos were among 39 free digital offerings from Spoleto Festival USA, all posted to the Festival’s YouTube channel. Three additional digital concerts—two choral and one site-specific orchestral piece, *Arden*—were buttressed by 22 video profiles of past Festival Orchestra and Choir members who shared how the last year in lockdown has shaped their careers and relationships to their art. All videos were viewed more than 6,480 times. Spoleto also presented two ticketed productions

created specifically for remote audiences. The first interactive work took place entirely by phone: 600 HIGHWAYMEN's *A Thousand Ways (Part One): A Phone Call* paired 10 participants with strangers for an hourlong interaction by phone. "Every conversation, every pairing, is unique to that hour of time...and that allows it to be a stirring piece of theater," reviewed *Charleston City Paper*. Similarly, *The Journey*—created by illusionist Scott Silven—took participants into a comforting place of interconnectedness, this time over a Zoom-like platform. "To spin his tale," wrote *The Post and Courier*, "Silven goes full mentalist, producing numbers that match those we have just uttered, finding patterns among scraps of paper—and submitting the results as proof of a greater, universal connectedness during these disconnected times."

While Covid-19 prevented large gatherings throughout the season—as well as a culminating Festival Finale to signal the end of the 2021 season—there was an exciting foreshadowing of what's to come in 2022, particularly Spoleto Festival USA's long-awaited world-premiere opera, *Omar*. Before the 2021 season's start, co-composers Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels traveled to Charleston to hold a music workshop with 18 singers from the production. In the same week, *The Post and Courier* released a 10-page special report, "I am Omar." With remarkable imagery from photographer Gavin McIntyre and words by Jennifer Berry Hawes, the newspaper outlined Omar Ibn Said's history from West Africa to the Carolinas, hoping to reveal the Muslim scholar and author's birthplace and site of capture. The complete work can be found at postandcourier.com/omar.

Spoletto Festival USA

Founded in 1977, Spoleto Festival USA is an annual 17-day performing arts festival in Charleston, SC, that presents leading artists in classical and popular music, opera, jazz, dance, and theater. The 2022 season takes place May 27 to June 12 in various locations on the downtown peninsula. Spoleto Festival USA is a 501 (c)(3) charitable organization.

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