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OSO Arts Centre: the theatre that acted.

The OSO Arts Centre is a multidisciplinary arts venue situated by the picturesque Barnes Pond in South-West London. We usually have a busy schedule of theatre, music and comedy, as well as hosting an array of classes for members of the local community.

Our Covid-19 story is resoundingly positive. When lockdown was introduced, our theatre space was repurposed as a 'Crisis Kitchen', cooking and distributing thousands of meals for those in need. Now, thanks to the efforts of local volunteers, we are set to be one of the first theatres in the UK to reopen with a full live programme of indoor performance. Our Autumn season has been specially designed to support safe practice measures, showcasing innovative solutions to staging theatre in the age of Covid.

We believe that our story will be uplifting to all those who love the arts, and demonstrates the positive value that an arts organisation can have to its local community.

Going dark, feeding the community, and bringing our arts programme online.

Like all other theatres, the OSO had to close its doors when lockdown measures were introduced in March. The stage lights went dark, shows were cancelled, and staff were put on furlough.

However, rather than letting the theatre sit dormant, we decided to repurpose our auditorium space as a 'Crisis Kitchen'. Our retractable seating made way for an army of ovens, hobs and portable work surfaces. Thanks to the support of the Barnes Fund, our local council, and to the efforts of countless volunteers, we were able to cook and distribute free meals to those in need. Working with local frontline voluntary agencies, over the course of three months we provided over 10,000 meals to the elderly and vulnerable, NHS staff, and those in economic hardship. The OSO also collected over four tonnes of donations for the Barnes Food Bank.

For her efforts in coordinating this huge venture, arts centre manager Lisa Ross has been given 'local hero' awards by Richmond Council and local press.



The OSO Crisis Kitchen cooked over 10,000 free meals for those in need during the pandemic.

In April, we launched our online programme, titled '[The House Is Now Open](#)'. This included an [online art gallery](#) for works created in lockdown, a series of children's bedtime stories read by members of the local community (including astronaut [Helen Sharman](#) and actor Virginia McKenna), and a [networking tool](#) that facilitated new remote collaborations between creatives in the performing arts.

Reopening, and facilitating a socially distanced audience experience.

As the government began their phased easing of lockdown measures, we took advantage of the beautiful weather and restarted our café and bar service in the form of a 'pop-up' on Barnes Green. Having supported the community during the peak of the crisis, the community in turn are now helping us to get back on our feet. Our pop-up café has been staffed entirely by local volunteers, whose hard work has been instrumental in supporting the resumption of our theatre programme.

As soon as outdoor performance was able to resume, we began to draw on the wealth of musical talent in Barnes. Every Saturday and Sunday we've had jazz musicians performing impromptu sets outside the theatre.

The result of these numerous efforts is that we will be one of the first theatres in the UK to reopen with a full live indoor programme. We are very fortunate that by opening out all our studios into one large auditorium and setting up in a 'cabaret-style' layout with reserved table seating, we will be able to welcome audiences to a socially distanced theatre that will still deliver a fabulous audience experience:

- Audiences are invited to book an exclusive reserved table for either one, two, four or six people. With social distancing between tables, this creates a workable capacity of 47 (usually 74)
- Our bar, theatre foyer and toilets have been redesigned to create more space and improve movement around the venue.
- We are delighted to offer table service inside the theatre as an alternative to visiting the theatre bar.
- Thanks to our cabaret-style layout we can achieve viable social distancing while still pricing tickets for our standard theatre events at only £15 per person.
- Audience members can book with confidence. If a performance is cancelled or Covid-19 regulations prevent attendance, we will offer a full refund.

Creative solutions, immersive delights, and the return of panto!

Difficult circumstances require creative solutions, and we've challenged local theatre companies to create new works specially designed around safe practice guidelines. Our season opens on September 25th with 'Brief Encounters' - a selection of original short plays on themes of connection. Each play has been written with social distancing between actors in mind, with real married couples cast in roles for which proximity is necessitated by the script. The opening night sold out within three days of our season launch.

Particularly exciting is 'The Revellers Society' playing 5th-8th November. Big Adventure Productions are transforming the OSO into a 1920s secret-society bar, with the audience invited to promenade between its three immersive spaces. Sanitisation procedures are integrated into the show, with 'as much alcohol to rub on your hands as there is to quench your thirst'.

Our season concludes with our panto, 'Rapunzel: The Original Isolation Story'. A young woman (in need of a haircut) forced to live isolated in the highest tower of Barnard Castle... A prince with poor eyesight... Need we say more?

We're thrilled to be able to reopen with this exciting Autumn programme, and are hugely grateful to the many volunteers, donors and audience members who are helping us get back on our feet.



The OSO lit up green to celebrate the announcement that live indoor performance could resume.



Immersive show 'The Revellers Society' plays 5-8 November, and has been specially conceived to operate within government guidelines.