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A Balm for Weary Times

When the coronavirus pandemic shut down UCSB Arts & Lectures' live performances, it left a hole in a community that had come to rely on an eclectic mix of music, dance and fascinating speakers.

Fortunately, the people behind the scenes at Arts & Lectures decided they weren't going to let the season go fallow and fall silent. Their answer: a digital culture series of new content, archived performances and a curated mix of arts and ideas.

"Here at UCSB and in Santa Barbara, we help each other through hard times by coming together in solidarity and support of one another," said Celesta Billeci, Miller McCune Executive Director of Arts & Lectures. "But in this moment, we have to find new ways to be here for each other. As a community, we are still craving the arts and ideas that A&L speakers and performers provide, and we're still craving the connection that A&L offers. That need isn't going away, and neither is A&L."

Each week, Arts & Lectures staff will curate a selection of digital content based on the current season, including a roster of returning artists, archived lectures and education opportunities for students and the public.

"We're sharing lectures from our archives that we think people will find particularly useful right now, like Father Gregory Boyle, who founded Homeboy Industries, the largest gang intervention and re-entry program in the world," said Bilecci. "If anyone can show us the power we have as one individual to make a positive impact on the world, it's him."

Also on the docket are artists and speakers who would have been part of the spring quarter lineup. “We know people were heartbroken they couldn’t see Jane Goodall,” Bilecci continued. “We’re working hard to reschedule her lecture, but we wanted people to be able to enjoy the stunning documentary we recently screened about her, as well activities she offers through her Roots & Shoots program, which she would have presented here as a major outreach event.

In addition to sharing films that were part of the Banff Mountain Film World Tour, A&L is highlighting some of the work artists are creating in response to the current crisis, such as (spoiler alert!) Yo-Yo Ma’s “Songs of Comfort.” and revisiting the Speaking with Pico series, which brings renowned author Pico Iyer in conversation with a notable mix of writers and thinkers.

“We’re featuring education outreach sessions so that students — and everyone else for that matter — can participate in the lessons from some of today’s leading artists, like Lil Buck and Jon Boogz, the phenomenal street dance artists who use the language of movement to create a better world,” said Bilecci.

“Our program is integrated into many class curriculums,” Billeci continued, “and we work closely with faculty to create opportunities that supplement their instruction, so we are working to tie in our spring programming to what students are learning now in their online classes. Our program is an important part of the educational experience for students, and also for the community, and this digital series can help us remain a valuable resource.”

It’s easy to get in on the digital action, Billeci said. Simply visit A&L and join the email list to receive top-flight content. In addition, those who sign up will get to know a member of the staff or a student worker.

“As you get to know us, we also want to hear from you,” she said. “We’ll be asking for audience participation and sharing your ideas in later weeks and on social channels.”

It’s an ambitious project, but Billeci said it’s what the community needs in this time of social distancing and isolation.

“Perhaps now more than ever,” she explained, “we are hearing from our audience about a desire for community and a need for valuable resources for education and entertainment — the feeling is mutual! We’ve created this digital series to keep us

all engaged with the performers who inspire us, the speakers who make us think and everyone who brings a bit of joy and surprise into our lives.”

Besides, what is life without art?

“In times when we are all looking for inspiration, humor, discovery and connection, the arts bring us together through shared experience — even if it’s through a screen,” Billeci said. “They touch us deeply, spark our imagination, expand our world, allow us to dream and give us a language when words are not enough. As our friend Yo-Yo Ma says, ‘That’s art for life’s sake.’ ”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.