

All The World's a Stage

By John M. Eger
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With apologies to Shakespeare, it seems that public art has taken on a new dimension.

Music and theater festivals, opera without walls and the second three-day [WOW Festival](#), for Without Walls, held earlier this month by the acclaimed La Jolla Playhouse in California has raised the bar.



The Festival included 20 events that occurred simultaneously in and around the La Jolla Playhouse grounds and the University of California's San Diego campus. A Chekov play was held on the Scripps Research Institute's tennis courts; a solo performance called "The Bitter Game" about racism was performed on UCSD's basketball courts, while circus events, other music and theater performances occurred either on the grounds or in one or other of the three theaters that are part of the Playhouse complex.

There was also a Liz Lerman production called "Healing Wars" at the Mandell Weiss Forum, a "A Puppet Happening in the Garden" by The Animal Cracker Conspiracy, "The Spheres" by an Australian Group called Strange Fruit and many other family friendly events too many to mention.

But at theaters around the world, in Opera houses, museums and other cultural venues attendance primarily consists of an aging population. A National Endowment for the Arts ([NEA](#)) report released in 2009 said that the number of American adults attending arts and cultural events has sunk to its lowest level since 1982, which was when the NEA began conducting the poll. Young people, teens especially, do not attend anything but music festivals.



The [Wall Street Journal](#) recently did a piece on music festivals and reported that "Festivals are the way people want to experience music, more and more." Citing Coachella founder Paul Tollett: "This is the first time in history that parents and kids are going to shows together--and it's not embarrassing."

La Jolla Playhouse Artistic Director Christopher Ashley said, "Our inaugural Without Walls Festival in 2013 exceeded our wildest expectations, demonstrating that San Diego audiences continue to have a voracious appetite for one-of-a-kind experiences that transform our customary idea of theatre ... Across the theatre landscape, the relationship between the audience and the art is changing, and immersive theatre is taking place out in the world, playing with boundaries and experimenting with form. The audience is right in the middle of the action, creating a singular event that truly engages and surprises."

While the region's weather more readily lends itself to outdoor functions, every city can move their performing arts outdoors and hold events popular with people of all ages offering unconventional access to performing arts that the whole family can enjoy whether dance, theater, drama, or music in the most engaging may be a way to nurture and retain younger theater going audiences.

This year the WoW Festival was a smashing success with nearly 15,000 attendees. The La Jolla Playhouse reported in an "on-site survey during the Festival weekend ... that 23% of patrons attended with children. The survey also showed that 47% of Festival attendees were Millennials and 35% were in the Gen X age bracket. Additionally, 400 UC San Diego students attended the Without Walls (WoW) Festival as part of the Playhouse/University collaboration with UCSD's Triton Fest.

Clearly this was a winner for the Playhouse and for the community. In general, they found "that 50% of audiences for all of the Playhouse's WoW productions over the past few years have been brand new to the Playhouse, and while we don't have an exact breakdown of young people, anecdotally we've seen WoW programming attract a younger demographic that will hopefully continue to build the next generation of theatergoers."