

# Putting a whole lot of talent in the Black Box

## Vitek Wincza isn't letting COVID-19 pin him down

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Vitek Wincza has never been one to let the grass grow under his feet. Not even during a pandemic.



Pre-pandemic, Wincza's Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts was humming along with roughly 1,000 students of all ages across music, dance, visual, and dramatic arts. When COVID-19 hit, the HCA took a hit. A big hit. Seventy teachers were laid off and there was next to no income for six months even though half of the HCA's student body continued lessons over Zoom in pay-what-you-can group classes.

"Out of those 500 (students), only a few people paid," Wincza told The Spectator. "But it wasn't the purpose why. It was taking care of the kids and the families. It was important for us not to lose connection with our students."

Additionally, since March, 125 children of front-line workers have benefitted from the free online programming of the HCA's charitable arm, Culture for Kids in the Arts, the program manager for which is Wincza's wife, Victoria Long-Wincza.

While overseeing these activities, Wincza also cast an eye on some unfinished business in the HCA's 200-seat recital hall. Last September, the Ontario Trillium Foundation approved a \$138,900 grant over 12 months to the Culture for Kids in the Arts for improved infrastructure. That money was specifically earmarked for the conversion of an arts space, read recital hall, into a Black Box theatre as well as for the purchase of lighting, sound and tech equipment.

“Why don’t we build it during the pandemic?” Wincza asked rhetorically about the Black Box theatre.

“And so we built it.”

“The Black Box theatre project has been completed by top of the line suppliers in consultation with local specialists,” said HCA communications and school administrator, Allison Warwick.

“The Black Box theatre will professionalize and support a safe and portable infrastructure with an easy setup that can be modified for a variety of purposes.”

Those purposes include, among others, CKA Kinderfest Festival and Cushion Concerts, After School Arts program finale events, Artasia exhibition showcases, opera workshops and master classes, dance festivals, theatre, seminars, forums, community events as well as something Wincza recently dreamed up.

“I’m creating PASS, Performing Arts Sunday Series,” said Wincza. “We used to have a music series. The music series will continue, but will go under the umbrella of PASS. My goal is to have something for the people once a week at least on Sunday.”

So far, the lineup for PASS includes soprano Adrienne Pieczonka, and the usual suspects of keyboard titans, Valerie Tryon, André Laplante, and Janina Fialkowska.

With current public health regulations limiting indoor audiences to no more than 50 people, Wincza is planning to ticket livestreams of these recitals.

“You can’t break even on 50 people,” said Wincza. “So, that kind of could balance a little our deficiency.”

Specific dates for the recitals as well as for a public recognition of the Black Box theatre will be announced later.

In the meantime, the HCA is gearing up for the fall.

“Our top priority in welcoming students back is providing a safe place for them to return to,” said Warwick.

“The HCA has consulted with health professionals, kept informed about new government regulations, and connected with other studios as well as dance and music associations. Instructors and staff are being thoroughly trained, and we have increased sanitization measures. Class sizes will be smaller.

“With nearly 90 windows and large studios in our building, we have the physical infrastructure for strong air circulation and safe distancing. We are optimistic that the majority of our classes will run in the fall, and if not, we aim to bring each one of our teachers back.”

For those families not yet comfortable with in-person lessons for their children, Warwick says that the HCA is offering online options for many of its classes.

“On the one side I’m positively optimistic, but on another side I feel bad (about) whatever happens to others because I may be next,” said Wincza. “I’m positive that we’re going to get through. It won’t be easy. Financially, I will probably have to work another eight or 10 years to bring it back. I’m here to survive. That’s my life’s story.”

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