

'Art Will Never Be Silenced': In Minneapolis, Theatre Artists Are Standing Up to ICE

Despite needing to cancel shows and community events, the Twin



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On Saturday, January 24, Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis was getting ready for a 2 PM matinee performance of its show *Go, Dog. Go! • Ve Perro ¡Ve!*. But then that morning, ICE agents shot Alex Pretti 10 times, just two blocks from the theatre in the Whittier neighborhood of Minneapolis. The show could not go on.

"Many of our employees work or live right in this neighborhood, so they were impacted by the incident, by the ICE presence in this community," CTC's managing director Ryan French tells Playbill. "In the aftermath following the shooting, there were flash bang grenades and tear gas in the streets, and that was quite traumatic for the people that work here, who call this neighborhood home."

CTC cancelled both performances of *Go, Dog. Go!* that day, as well as the Sunday performances. They're one of many theatres whose operations have been impacted by ICE's presence in Minneapolis, as safety concerns have led to lower turnout at shows, and has even led to cancelled events.

Theater Mu Artistic Director Fran de Leon is not mincing words: "Certain people say, 'Oh, is it really that bad? Is it really that bad?' And the answer is, it's worse. It's actually worse. We have artists who are dealing with their families disappearing. We're dealing with them not going to work, even though

they're documented or citizens ... And soon, people are going to not be able to pay their rent. There are cars that are being left on the street because people are just getting plucked out and their cars are left there."

Theater Mu primarily serves primarily Asian American artists and audience. As ICE has been targeting Minneapolis' Asian American community—including breaking into the house of a Hmong American citizen and forcing him to walk out into sub-zero temperatures in his underwear—Theater Mu has had to cancel multiple events to ensure the safety of their audience. After Pretti was killed, the theatre cancelled their 2026 New Eyes Festival (which was scheduled for January 23–25) and their February 22 Lunar New Year cabaret/fundraiser. They've also cancelled their plans to go into Minneapolis public schools to teach kids, says de Leon, "because the kids aren't going to school because their parents are holding them back ... Some of those [events] are tied to grants that are on a timed basis. So if we don't do them by this time, we can't claim that money. It's really just putting us in a position where we're standing here going, we don't know what to do."



Instead of taking to the stage, some artists have taken to the street. That is how Jennifer Weir, founding executive director of TaikoArts Midwest, found herself outside one day in negative 15 degree weather, playing taiko drums in the middle of [an anti-ICE protest](#) in downtown Minneapolis. “We’re at a corner drumming and then suddenly, another person with a snare drum pulls up and starts jamming with us. And then a person with a soprano saxophone is with us wailing along. And then a person with a Native drum comes, and then somebody starts dancing,” exclaims Weir. “It becomes this, like, pop-up community ... And it was so great, because those kinds of things carry you through all the news of all the horrible things that are happening to everybody.”

Both Weir and de Leon have also reported that in the face of concerns over ICE showing up to public events, there have been more ad-hoc “confidential artist gatherings,” as de Leon puts it. “If we can’t do more highly publicized events, what can we do to make sure that we are still serving the arts community, the greater community, the AAPI community, the community of the Twin Cities? So people are going underground. There are events that are happening confidentially, just to make sure that folks are safe.” For instance, there is currently a [pop-up exhibition](#) of anti-ICE posters designed by local artists, with slogans such as “No MN Nice for ICE” and “We love our immigrant neighbors.”

Even though these companies are still working to put on events, their bottom line has been hit with these cancellations. CTC has resumed performances of *Go, Dog. Go!*; it runs through February 22. But French admits that attendance has been low for the show, which is in English and Spanish. “We have seen a depression in the number of people coming to shows. We are likely going to miss our ticket goal,” French sighs, before continuing, “The financial hit is real. And at a time when all theatres across the nation are struggling to get back to our pre-pandemic normal, this is a significant hit for CTC.” At the same time, French emphasizes, “The arts must continue. We believe in that. That is our mission.”

Weir points out that art has always been an integral part of resistance against tyranny, whether it’s through protest songs or prisoners in Japanese internment camps playing taiko drums to keep their spirits up.

These days when she’s in the company of other artists, “it brings me to tears, even talking about it,” Weir says, her voice thick with emotion. “Because it’s people literally carving out of their grief and rage something safe for other people. Instead of just giving into that feeling of despair, they’re like, ‘Let’s be creative, let’s connect to our humanity and our spirits and hold each other during this time.’” To her, artists are integral to keeping joy and hope alive, ingredients that are key to long-term resistance: “The question is, how long can people sustain this? And I think that’s where artists come in: to provide that healing space, that rejuvenating space for people.” This fall, TaikoArts Midwest, Theater Mu, San Jose

Taiko are collaborating on *Swingposium*, which dramatize the Japanese internment camp experience and how the detainees there engaged in resistance using art.



Kimberly Richardson, Zachary David Hodgkins, Eric Samuel Romero, Julia Diaz, and Cooper Lajeunesse in Children's Theatre Company's *Go, Dog. Go!*

Despite the recent announcement from border czar Tom Homan that ICE is winding down its operations in Minneapolis while still leaving an ICE contingent in the city, these artists are not breathing easier. Weir points out that ICE agents are ramping up their presence in other American cities. "Prepare yourself, learn from what's happening here, and stay involved," she cautions, before giving a piece of practical advice: "Figure out your privacy settings. You can't be too paranoid now, because [the federal government is] really turning against their own citizens."

French also echoed Weir's statement, while also pointing out that it's going to take time for Minneapolis to heal from the trauma of what has happened: "What lessons have you learned from people in the Twin Cities about how to show up, should you need to do so in your own community?" he asks rhetorically. "And if people are interested in helping Minneapolis, Saint Paul

recover, there are many ways people can help, the resources that are needed. The healing has to begin. There is still ICE presence. There are people that are scared, there are people that need help. And I would encourage anyone out there to find ways to support this community. And support the arts."

When she spoke to Playbill, de Leon was in the process of casting Theater Mu's next show *Hmong Futures* (scheduled to perform April 9-May 3). She admits she's worried, considering ICE has been targeting the Hmong community in particular. But that's only increased her resolve to do the show. "Art will never be silenced, and we'll find a way," she says with determination, adding the theatre is prepared to hire security. "It's too much to continue to allow them to rob us of these moments of art. We're not allowing them to win. We're going to come out on top of this. I have no doubts about that. We always have. People of color and artists have always had a thumb pushing us down, and they have yet to get rid of us. And they're not going to this time either."

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