

# 'ATLANTIC BUBBLE WAS SO PERFECT'

**Why Saint John has been a haven for artists amid pandemic**

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**SAINT JOHN** • At the start of 2020, Caroline Bell was one of many actors living in Toronto. She was concerned with securing an agent, updating her headshots, and going to auditions.

Twelve months later, she's living at home in Saint John, actively participating in a theatre scene she thinks is still thriving in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic.

"Because the Atlantic bubble was so perfect, I had more theatre opportunities than my peers in Toronto," she said. The pandemic has wreaked havoc on the world and the art scene has been one of the biggest institutional casualties. An industry largely dependent on big crowds and in-person interactions changed overnight into a restricted, isolated platform.

Artists felt the pinch in Saint John during the early months as plays were

postponed or cancelled, music tours were called off, and galleries closed their doors. While the pandemic might have appeared to be a death knell for art in the city, performers and creators are fighting to keep it alive despite social distancing and crowd limitations.

"When the pandemic hit, everything shut down and everything was pretty quiet," said Darren Emenau, a ceramic artist and potter. "I found the galleries definitely slowed down immediately and I was quite concerned about that."

Emenau works at home in his studio, managing to hold onto his place of business while so many other artists were shut out of regular venues.

"My overhead is quite low," he said. "I felt lucky that way."

To cope with the changes brought about by the pandemic, Emenau threw himself into his work, churning out pieces and posting them online to stay engaged with his audience.

"I just worked like crazy, that's how I coped with COVID stress," he said. "I thought it was really important to keep my face out there."

The online world became a vital platform for Saint John artists during the pandemic, particularly musicians

who lacked in-person audiences. Local group Tomato/Tomato, consisting of John and Lisa McLaggan, spent much of 2020 recording their fifth studio album, but they also made time for at-home concerts they streamed through Facebook as part of the National Arts Centre's #CanadaPerforms series.

"We're really honoured that they chose us," Lisa McLaggan told the Telegraph-Journal in April.

Musician Brent Mason returned to Saint John from a British Columbia tour just as the pandemic started. He's managed to stay busy with a few regular gigs and by turning his attention to writing.

"I've been staying busy more with my laptop than my guitar," he said. "I had a renewed appreciation for playing and sharing with people and the back and forth."

During the pandemic, Emenau was able to get his work into exhibitions at the Jones Gallery and one in Toronto, the city Bell left earlier in the year for work in Saint John. Bell was cast in The Wolves, a Saint John Theatre Company production originally marked to go onstage in May, and decided to return to her home city. Unfortunately,

COVID-19 postponed The Wolves indefinitely, although Bell is hopeful it will go on in 2021.

Despite the setback, Bell embraced the opportunities in Saint John. She applied to the Fundy Fringe Festival, reached out to other creators, and focused on making something of her own.

"Those first few months I had great interactions with online play readings," she said. "It made the community easier to access."

"The pandemic meant I could sit down and create something of my own. My creative life really flourished."

Bell participated in the Fundy Fringe Festival and she was cast in the Saint John Theatre Company's production of The Turn of the Screw in October, which she was able to perform for live and virtual audiences thanks to a streaming setup.

"[Theatre is] more accessible now," she said. "There are no subtitles in real life theatre."

Bell is hopeful live performances can continue to thrive in Saint John as the pandemic enters 2021.

"It's a time of renewal," she said. "It's the opposite of dying."