

# Never Missing a Curtain This Season, the Met Opera Takes a Final Bow

As it ended a challenging pandemic return, the Met had one last marathon: a matinee, an evening performance, and then moving out as American Ballet Theater moved in.

By Julia Jacobs

June 13, 2022

In a season dogged by wave after wave of the coronavirus, there were moments when the Metropolitan Opera was on the verge of cancellation.

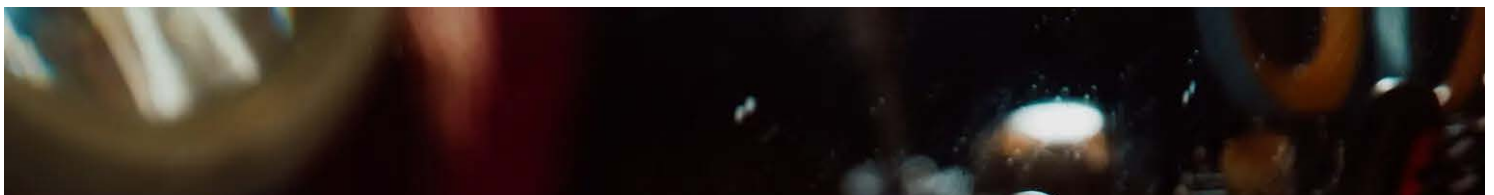
There was the time a wicked stepsister in “Cinderella” tested positive shortly before a performance, and the Met had to enlist a soprano from another production to sing the role from the wings while a dancer acted it onstage.

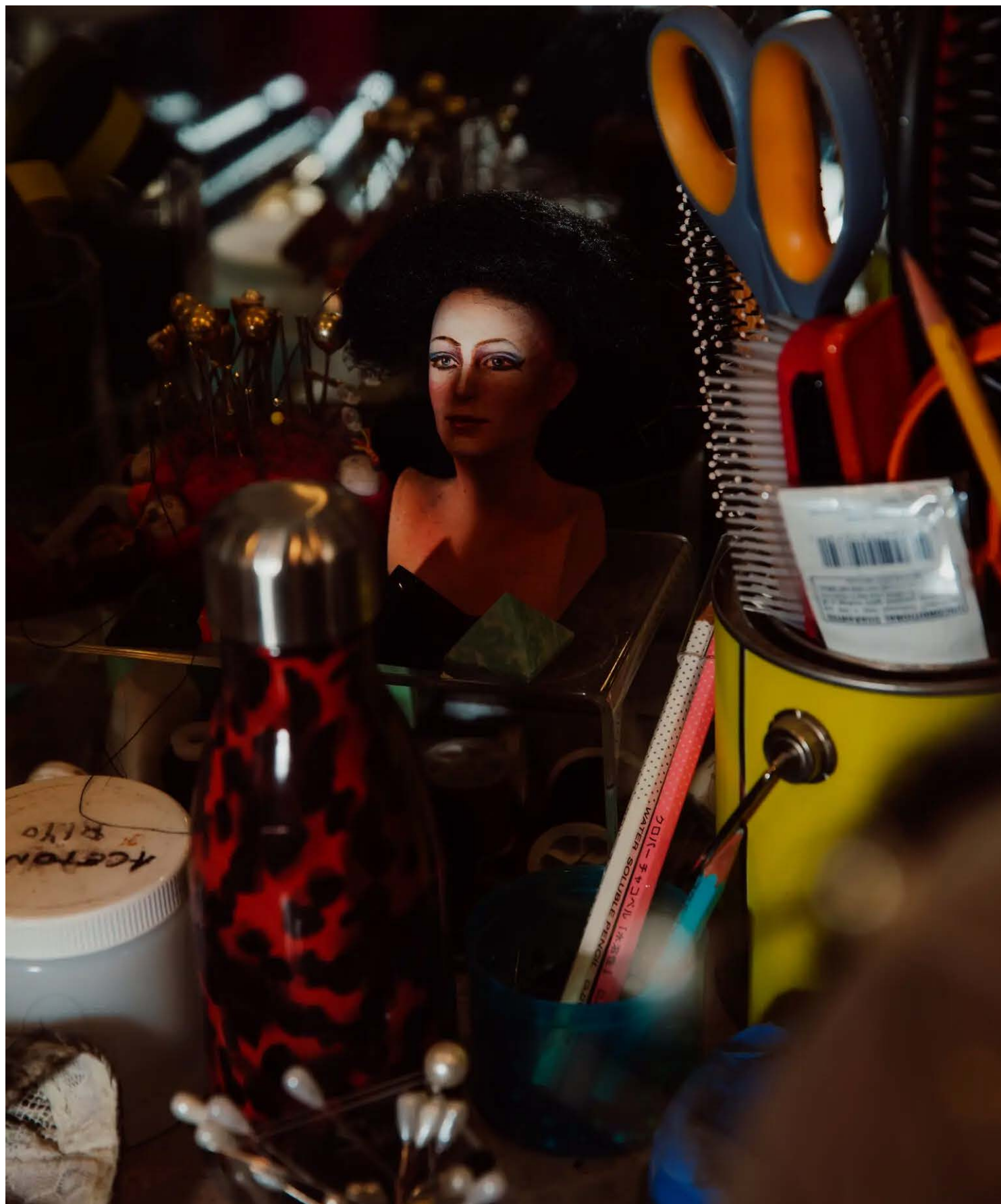
And there was the time that five of the principal performers in “Hamlet” were out at the same time, but covers — as the company calls its invaluable understudies — stepped in to make sure the show went on.

“We had covers for covers,” said Tera Willis, the head of the wig and makeup department, recalling how she would sit a last-minute performer down next to a pile of wigs and try one after another until something fit.

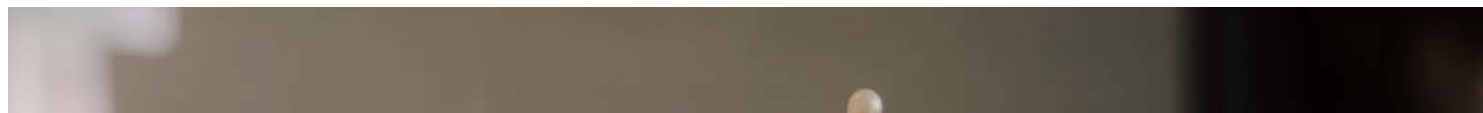


It takes a small army to keep the Met Opera, the largest performing arts organization in the United States, running. This was perhaps its most challenging season. Justin J Wee for The New York Times





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The Omicron surge in winter forced many Broadway shows to pause; New York City Ballet and Radio City Music Hall had to end their popular holiday shows before Christmas; and some Carnegie Hall concerts were postponed.

But the Metropolitan Opera soldiered on with a set of rigidly enforced Covid policies, a robust system of covers — and a bit of luck. As it closed its season on Saturday night, it was one of the only major opera companies in the world not to miss a curtain this season because of the pandemic.

Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager, credited the company's stringent vaccine, masking and testing policies, the deep roster of artists it can call on and a new ethos around the sniffles.

"Before the pandemic, if a singer had a cold, I would urge them to sing anyway," Gelb said. "Now we're in the position of telling people who have colds to stay as far away from the theater as possible."



A backdrop was lowered into the arms of waiting stagehands. Justin J Wee for The New York Times

It's not that the company escaped the virus. There were nearly 200 opera performances over the course of the season, and nearly 150 Covid-related cancellations of principal singers and conductors. But the Met was able to turn to an extensive list of covers and other artists to fill in.

On Saturday, the Met mounted its final operas of a rewarding but — as many employees will admit — exhausting season. And its last day was going to be a marathon: a matinee of Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress" and an evening performance of Verdi's "Rigoletto" before stagehands had less than 48 hours to ready the opera house for American Ballet Theater's run of "Don Quixote," opening Monday evening.

1:05 P.M.

## The curtain goes up on 'The Rake's Progress.'

In the wings, John Coleman, a stage manager, flashes a thumbs-up at the bass James Creswell, who nods that he is ready.

"Here we begin," said Cristobel Langan, another stage manager, repeating the three words she says as a ritual at the top of every opera.

The orchestra begins to swell, and Langan follows along, flipping pages of the score in front of her.





Bliss, James Creswell and Golda Schultz performing, while two stage managers, Cristobel Langan and John Coleman, work in the wings. Justin J Wee for The New York Times

It has been about a month since Langan returned to a full workload since contracting coronavirus — one of 860-some cases at the Met since the start of the season. The virus forced her to miss two months of work. During the Omicron wave in late December and early January, about 100 people a week were testing positive, according to the company.

“We were all doing each other’s jobs just to get the show on,” Langan said.

4:16 P.M.

### ‘The Rake’s Progress’ concludes.

The curtain falls, the performers onstage embrace. At the same time, dozens of stagehands in hard hats flood in to start dismantling the set.

They have three-and-a-half hours to clear it out to build the opulent Duke’s palace for “Rigoletto” in its place. Stagehands pack faux greenery into garbage bags and push a vintage-style Mercedes-Benz offstage. They load four 40-foot shipping containers with set pieces that will be trucked to a yard near Newark Liberty International Airport, where about 1,500 containers full of the Met’s sets are stored.



As stagehands broke down the set of "The Rake's Progress," the red and gold set of "Rigoletto" was readied for the evening. Justin J Wee for The New York Times



Costumes were packed up so they could be shipped out of the opera house. Justin J Wee for The New York Times





Stagehands readied a blackout curtain. Justin J Wee for The New York Times

Not all of the “Rake’s” set will be loaded out on Saturday — just enough so that “Rigoletto” can take the stage at 8 p.m. and, a few hours later, American Ballet Theater can take over.

“It’s a race against time,” Mr. Gelb said.

7:30 P.M.

### Staff prepare for the final opera of the season.

Wearing the Met ushers’ black jacket, with its red lapels and gold buttons, Vivian Goldring, a Met usher for more than 30 years, points audience members to their seats.

Goldring, an 82-year-old opera enthusiast, has been standing in the same spot for most of her time as an usher, watching decades of seasons from her perch in the Dress Circle. Over a month ago, while she was watching Puccini’s “Madama Butterfly,” a Met employee came into the opera house to tell her that she needed to leave.

“I said, ‘Why?’” Goldring recalled. “And they said, ‘Because you have Covid.’ ”





Vivian Goldring, an usher, has worked at the Met for decades. Justin J Wee for The New York Times

8:04 P.M.

## Next opera up: 'Rigoletto' begins.

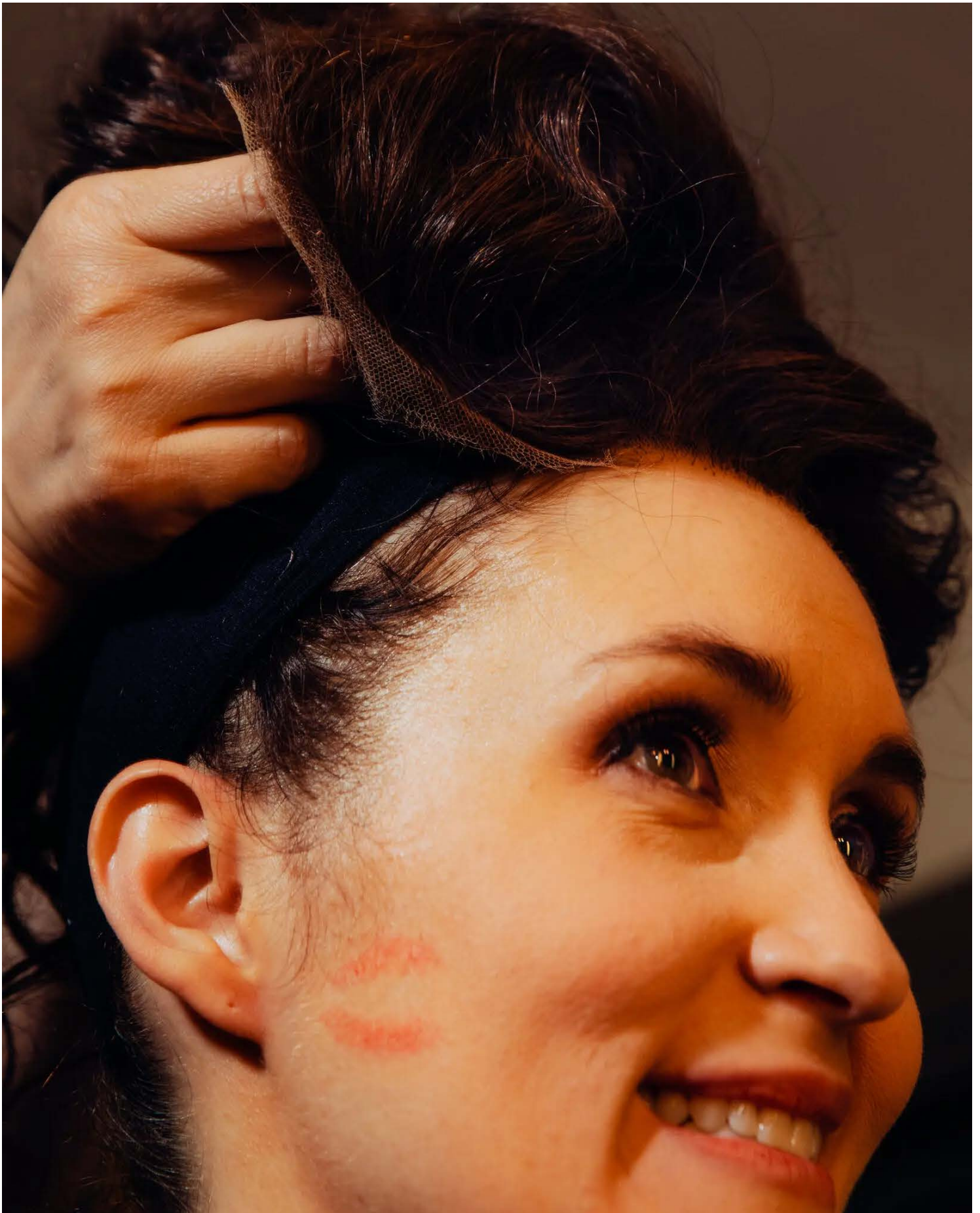
Backstage, the baritone Quinn Kelsey, who missed some of his scheduled performances in the title role of "Rigoletto" because of a coronavirus infection, waits in the wings, wearing his long-tailed velvet coat and jesterly red cheeks.

Margo Maier-Moul, a stage manager, makes a phone call to ask how many patrons are still lined up outside the opera house. The vaccination checks had slowed the preshow process, but she was under orders to hold the curtain if there was a significant line.

Three days out from a spinal surgery, Gelb has appeared at the opera house to make a preshow speech, thanking audience members for their support.

"The last thing we want to do is ever let you down," Gelb tells them.





The soprano Erin Morley had her wig removed after "Rigoletto." Justin J Wee for The New York Times



After the final performance, her name was taken off her dressing room door. Justin J Wee for The New York Times

10:56 P.M.



## Confetti falls, and opera makes way for ballet.

As the cast of “Rigoletto” takes its final bow, confetti — eight pounds’ worth — shoots into the theater and rains down onto the audience.

Within seconds, stagehands are pulling the comforter and pillows off a bed at center stage, pulling up light cords and drilling up the wooden slats of the stage.





As confetti rained down after the last performance of an usually challenging season, the singers Chan e Curtis and Craig Colclough took their bows. Justin J Wee for The New York Times

11:30 P.M.

## American Ballet Theater prepares to move in.

Elsewhere in theater, the ballet stagehands wait for the signal to start their work. For days, they have been loading in set pieces, hiding them in corners of the cavernous opera house so they can find them after the Met loads out.

“It’ll be like Easter Sunday,” said Vincent Roca, Ballet Theater’s director of production. Because of the pandemic, it has been three years since the company has had a spring season at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Hidden below the stage level, the towering windmill and wooden horse of “Don Quixote” sit amid a maze of set pieces. The opera and ballet stagehands will work through the night, transforming the theater into storybook Spain.

“A lot of times,” said Jim Pizzo, the Met’s assistant master carpenter, “the best show is what goes on backstage.”