

# Missing the Acts You Love? Spare a Thought for These Superfans

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By Thomas Rogers

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Jiyoung Lee, 49

Seoul



Jiyoung Lee, a South Korean academic, with her book "BTS, Art Revolution." The 2019 work combines Lee's two obsessions: the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and the Korean boy band BTS. Sisa Journal

Jiyoung Lee knows she's an unlikely fan of BTS, the South Korean boy band. The seven-member K-pop group has attracted a passionate international following in recent years, selling out stadiums across Asia and the United States, largely to audiences in their teens or early 20s. Lee, on the other hand, is a 49-year-old professor at Sejong University specializing in the notoriously impenetrable work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

“When I talk about BTS in public, some people look at me like, ‘Oh my God, she is a middle-aged woman and a philosophy professor, what happened to her?’” the soft-spoken academic recently said via Skype from her apartment in Seoul. “But what is wrong with listening to good music?”

In addition to her work on French philosophy, Lee has also published a book about the band, which has been translated into English as “BTS, Art Revolution.” Sometimes, she said, she has spent all day on weekends watching BTS videos, and has run up to ten BTS fan Twitter accounts simultaneously, which she uses to connect with other members of “the Army,” as the group’s die-hard fans call themselves.

Lee planned to attend all four Seoul concerts for BTS’s “Map of the Soul Tour,” originally scheduled for mid-April. Because tickets sell out so quickly, she had enlisted her son to help her buy them at an esports cafe she had chosen for its high-powered computers and fast internet. But when the concerts were canceled in February as the coronavirus spread in South Korea, “my dream was gone,” she said.

After the cancellations, Lee said, she was inspired by the messages of compassion and positivity in some BTS songs to donate the refund for the tickets to a South Korean disaster relief organization. (That group received the equivalent of more than \$430,000 from BTS fans.) “BTS is not just an object of fascination from little girls screaming,” she said. “I feel like I am very close friends with them, and we wanted to do something good for BTS, as friends.”



BTS performing in Los Angeles in December 2019. Rich Fury/Getty Images For Iheartmedia

Although the restrictions on public life brought about by the coronavirus are less stringent in South Korea than in many other countries, Lee has been almost entirely confined to her apartment in Seoul since February, she said. Her 24-year-old son has Crohn’s disease, an inflammatory condition that requires him to take immune-suppressing medicine and puts him at particular risk of getting severely sick from the virus. “It is very scary,” she said. “I don’t want to imagine what happens if my son is affected.”

So instead, Lee has found another form of escape. She sometimes climbs into her car with her husband and son, and making sure the windows are rolled up, they drive around their neighborhood, blasting BTS at maximum volume.

“We cannot go outside the car, but with BTS and the cherry blossom trees,” she said, “it’s perfect.”

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Jean Andrews, 67

New York



Jean Andrews in front of the Met, in 2016. Bill Tai

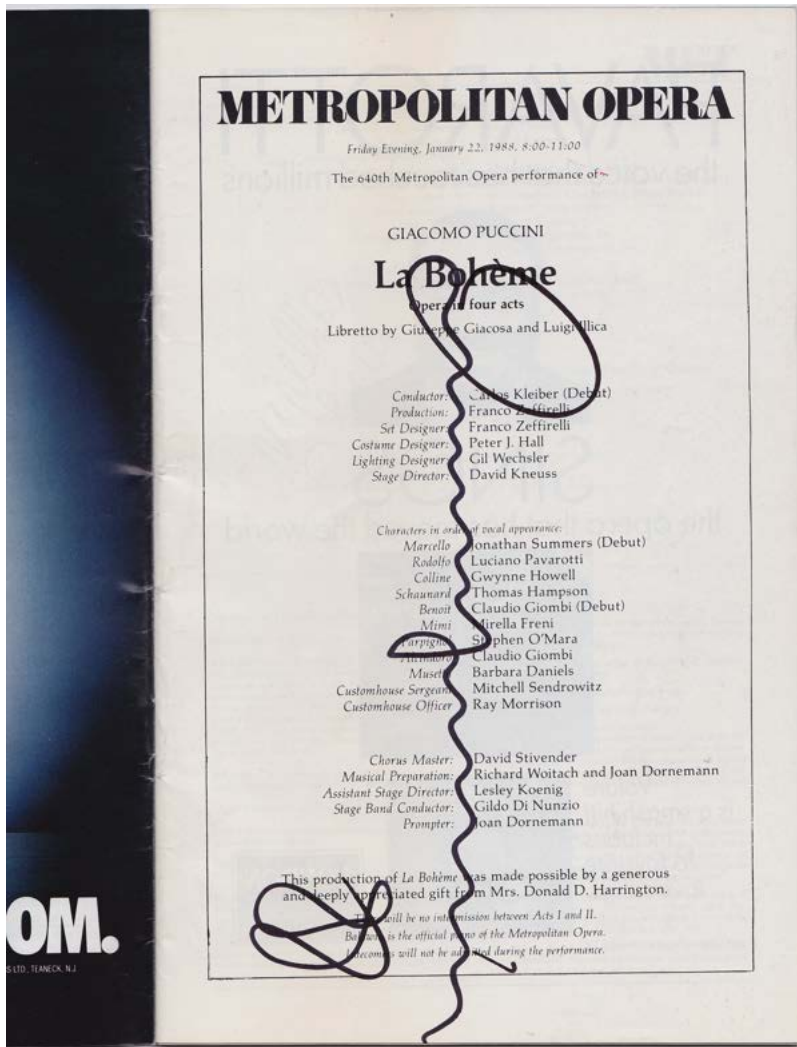
For about 25 years, starting in the 1980s, Jean Andrews's Friday nights would involve hours of waiting for standing-room tickets to the Metropolitan Opera. The tickets she wanted weren't on sale until 10 a.m. on Saturday, but because Andrews was adamant about watching performances from the front row, she would often get in line at midnight with the city's other hard-core opera fans.

"We had brawls about people cutting in line," she said via Skype from her apartment in Brooklyn. "The 'Ring' cycle was really cutthroat."

A retired geologist and lawyer, Andrews might be one of the New York's most obsessive operagoers. Before the city's venues closed their doors on March 12, she was attending about 10 to 15 opera-related performances per month, she said — a reduction from some years, when it had been more like 25. Unsurprisingly, the news of the shutdown came as a blow. "I was in shock," she said, "just in shock."



Bongo, a plush toy Andrews called her "Adventure Monkey Extraordinaire" and which she takes to most performances, at the Met before a performance of Wagner's "Das Rheingold." Jean Andrews



A playbill Luciano Pavarotti signed for Andrews in 1988.





Andrews with the soprano Christine Goerke, who sang Brünnhilde in the Met's recent "Ring" cycle. Matthew Sprizzo

The Met has since furloughed much of its staff and canceled the rest of its season; the company's post-pandemic future is unclear. "It is one of the great opera houses of the world, and I worry about it," Andrews said.

Although she saw her first opera as a teen — Verdi's "Rigoletto," which she deemed "not great" — she rediscovered the art form as an adult, after a personal tragedy. In 1985, she was still coming to terms with the death of her brother in a car accident years earlier when she got a ticket to a Met performance of Berg's "Wozzeck," an opera centered on a man who murders the mother of his child.

"It really spoke to me," she said, "because it just really captured all of the existential dread and anger and despair with the world I felt very acutely."

After that, she embarked on what she described as an opera education, seeing many Met productions multiple times. At first, she recalled, other regular operagoers would make fun of her for being too positive about performances, "so I started being more critical." Nowadays, she said, "I'm certainly critical."



Some curtain calls from the Metropolitan Opera's 2019-20 season, photographed by Jean Andrews, who, before the coronavirus pandemic, usually went to around 15 opera-related performances per month. Jean Andrews

Shortly after the Met shut down, Andrews confronted a potentially greater calamity, when Bill, her husband of 25 years, came down with the symptoms of Covid-19. "I think maybe Bill getting sick so early made it so I wasn't worried about opera anymore," she said. "Instead, I was worried about him, and me."

As her husband quarantined himself in the room next door (and ultimately recovered), Andrews passed the time watching streams of opera performances in her bedroom, including Bizet's "Carmen."

"I would never go see a 'Carmen.' I don't even like 'Carmen,'" she said. "But I thought it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen."

**Hans Swaerdens, 55**

**Almere, the Netherlands**



Hans Swaerdens with a performer from the Blue Man Group at the Las Vegas Luxor Theater in 2017.

By his own estimate, Hans Swaerdens has seen the Blue Man Group, the long-running stage act featuring three men in bald caps and garish makeup, about 200 times. He has taken part in Blue Man Group cruises, organized fan meet-ups around the world and even built his own version of the group's trademark three-person percussion instrument out of plastic piping.

He and two friends would dress up in blue paint, he said, and perform with the instrument at parties, including for his employer, the Dutch airline KLM, where he works as a ground engineer. "That was the first time I got a worried email from Blue Man Group headquarters," he said, via Skype from his home about 20 miles west of Amsterdam, sitting in front of the glass case of Blue Man Group memorabilia. After an acquaintance of his at the company intervened, the cease-and-desist order was canceled, Swaerdens said.





Swaerdens with his homemade plastic piping instrument, based on one played in the Blue Man Group's show.

“When I tell people how many times I’ve seen the show,” he said, “I see them thinking, ‘cuckoo.’”

This year was meant to be a good one, Swaerdens said. In May, he and his family were supposed to travel to Chicago, where the Blue Man Group has an ongoing show that he hoped to see “two or three times” during his visit. The act was also slated to come to the Netherlands on tour, and in September, he was hoping to travel to the group’s residency in Las Vegas.

But the group’s residencies have now shuttered, and Cirque du Soleil, which acquired Blue Man Group in 2017, has furloughed 95 percent of its staff.



Swaerdens at the Blue Man Group's tour stop in Amsterdam last year, with (from left) his wife, Joyce, his daughter's boyfriend, Thomas, and his daughter, Ashley.



Barney, the mascot for a Blue Man Group fans group, at a 2018 show in Las Vegas.

Swaerdens, a jovial man with a bald head that gives him a Blue Man-esque silhouette, struggled to explain what it was about the show and its blend of stunts, musical performance and slapstick comedy that resonates so deeply with him. “It’s like Mr. Bean,” he said. “You either love it or hate it.”

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But he noted that his most intense periods of fandom had coincided with particularly stressful periods in his life, when he was having a dispute with a stalkerish acquaintance, for instance, or struggling with a side business as a handyman. “When you see the show you are able to forget all the things that are happening in your life,” he said. “Some people smoke, some people drink. I see Blue Man Group.”



Cast members of the Blue Man Group receiving a gift from fans in Zurich.

At the moment, he added, he could use some distraction. Swaerdens’s work involves inspecting planes after they arrive at Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport, but, as travel has plummeted, so has his workload.

“I hope I have a job at the end of the year,” he said. “Not being able to see the show, it’s the least of my problems right now. Though, it would be nice.”

## Erika Gregor, 86, and Ulrich Gregor, 87

Berlin



Ulrich and Erika Gregor in a Berlin movie theater. By the couple's own estimation, they have been to the movies together more than 22,000 times. John Macdougall/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Throughout their 60-year marriage, Erika and Gregor Ulrich have been steadfast moviegoers. By their estimate, they've been to the movies together more than 22,000 times — that's an average of once every day.

In the coming months, the pair had counted on visiting the Cannes Film Festival, the Karlovy Vary Film Festival in the Czech Republic and, one of their favorites, goEast, a festival of mostly Eastern European film in the central German city of Wiesbaden. There, Ms. Gregor explained in a joint phone call from their home in Berlin, the pair often sees five or six films a day.

Since Berlin's movie theaters were shuttered in mid-March, the Gregors have been mostly confined to their home. Mr. Gregor explains that they miss "sitting in the front row and seeing the curtain open," and that, instead of going to the movies, they have largely been watching streams of local theater performances.

Movie theaters can never fully be replaced by at-home viewing, Mr. Gregor said, since cinemas are "a place where you meet and form opinions and change opinions" through interpersonal interaction.

The couple has shared an obsession with moviegoing ever since they met in 1957, at a screening Mr. Gregor was hosting at the Free University in Berlin. At the event, Ms. Gregor recalled, she told him she wasn't fond of the film he had shown that evening, a 1930 silent German movie called "People on Sunday" which she deemed "sexist and un-humanist." Ulrich promised to show a more progressive film if she returned. She did, and a year later, they launched a film club together; three years later they were married.



The Gregors met at a screening at college in the 1950s. John Macdougall/Agence France-  
Presse — Getty Images

“I always wanted to change the world,” Ms. Gregor said. “Then I met Ulrich, and I saw that by showing movies and discussing it with the audience, you could change something.” For decades, they organized film events in Berlin, and co-founded an art-house movie theater, called Arsenal, from which they retired in 2002.

Unlike pundits who argue that the pandemic will accelerate a trend toward video-on-demand distribution that threatens theaters’ business model, the Gregors said they were optimistic about the future of cinema.

But when it came to the coronavirus, Ms. Gregor was more fatalistic. She pointed out that she and her husband had been through worse, including a childhood in the Third Reich, “which wasn’t exactly fun,” and that Mr. Gregor had been forcibly resettled to West Germany from a region that is now Poland at the end of the conflict.

“If we don’t survive this, we can’t get worked up about that,” she said, and laughed. “We’re old enough.”

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## Kai Gault, 31

San Francisco



Kai Gault at Project Nunway X, a drag event in San Francisco. Gareth Gooch

Of all the things Kai Gault, 31, misses about going to drag shows — the costumes, the music, the performers' banter with the crowd — the biggest is human contact. "I miss being able to hug a drag queen," Gault recently said via Skype from San Francisco.

Until recently, Gault — who works as a teacher's aid at a school for emotionally disturbed teens and uses the gender-neutral pronouns they and them — would attend several drag shows every week, they said.

"There was a solid chunk of time where I relied on whatever partner I was living with for personal connection, and I was a bit codependent," Gault said. "I worked hard at being more social and going out, and drag has provided such a good vehicle for that."

Luckily, Gault is not stuck alone at home during the pandemic. Because they are in a polyamorous relationship, they have been sheltering in place with both their partners. "It's nice having two people I see every day," Gault said, even though the rules of their relationship can make things a bit awkward. "There's an evening a week they set aside for the two of them," they said, "and that's the day Kai has to sit alone."

Gault first discovered their love of drag in 2007, while attending Oakland University in Michigan. At that time, they still identified as straight and female. "Seeing people get up onstage and look so fabulous and express themselves, it resonated for me," they said. "There was a little part of me reaching for this, grappling to get out."

Struggling with mental health issues, they dropped out and ended up squatting in a foreclosed home in Detroit, before moving to San Jose, Calif., where they found a job and began frequenting drag nights. They later came out as bisexual and nonbinary, relocated to San Francisco and began doing drag themselves, under the stage name Kaikai Bee Michaels.



Gault performs in drag under the stage name Kaikai Bee Michaels. Cash Monet

In a typical week, Gault would see everything from traditional drag, with "classic, old-school queens looking beautiful, doing Whitney Houston songs," to more unvarnished performances. "I like stuff that makes people uncomfortable," they said, "and if it's overtly sexual or gross, I love it all."

Since the pandemic started, Gault has watched some online drag shows, which often blend prerecorded videos and live elements on digital channels like Twitch and Instagram. "The online shows are not a substitution for an in-person connection," Gault said. "You're sitting there with a drink, watching drag on TV. I'm a bit over that now."

Gault is not particularly worried that the virus will be a death knell for the city's drag scene, which was already struggling as rising rents force venue closures. "I'm worried about people individually, but I'm not worried about drag as a whole," Gault said. "It's been around this long through all of history, so I don't think it's going anywhere."

"Even if the world is burned down and we're huddled in tents," they said, "we'll still have drag shows."

A version of this article appears in print on May 17, 2020, Section AR, Page 11 of the New York edition with the headline: Superfans, Now Superdisappointed