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What Timothée Chalamet got right about opera, ballet — and my mornings in synagogue

The actor seemed to dismiss the fine arts as niche. But if Judaism teaches us anything, it's that niche is good.

[Andrew Silow-Carroll](#) March 11, 2026



(JTA illustration; Chalamet image: Amy Martin Photography; Wikimedia Commons)

On a Saturday in January I went to Shabbat services in the morning and the New York City Ballet in the evening.

By which I mean, maybe Timothée Chalamet has a point.

The star of the Oscar-nominated ping-pong biopic “Marty Supreme” is raising a ruckus with his suggestion that ballet and opera are dying art forms. His remarks came in a Variety and CNN town hall with fellow actor Matthew McConaughey, where the two discussed efforts to keep movie theaters alive in the face of competition from streaming services.

“I don’t want to be working in ballet or opera or things where it’s like, ‘Hey! Keep this thing alive,’” the 30-year-old Chalamet said in comments that circulated widely on social media this week. “Even though it’s like no one cares about this anymore.”

Ballet and opera companies clapped back. “Every night at the Royal Opera House, thousands of people gather for ballet and opera,” the Royal Ballet and Opera House posted on Instagram. “If you’d like to reconsider, @tchalamet, our doors are open.”

OK, “no one cares” is a gross overstatement. The night I went to the NYCB, it was part of its “Art Series” that includes discounted tickets, a post-performance afterparty and cocktail tastings. The theater was packed with young, beautiful people who cheered the dancers like Knicks fans.

But despite events like these and excitement about new young creators (including the [opera director Yuval Sharon, the American-born son of Israeli parents who this week is making his debut at the Metropolitan Opera](#)), ballet and opera remain niche entertainments. [Los Angeles Times art critic Jessica Gelt recently compared annual ticket sales for all American opera and ballet](#) — 1.4 to 3 million each — to the [19 million viewers](#) “who tune into the Academy Awards on a single night each year.” Chalamet’s chat with McConaughey drew over 8 million viewers.

This week the [New York Times reported how the Metropolitan Opera — the world’s largest performing arts institution — is bleeding money](#), and dipping into its endowment to make up for sagging ticket sales. Like a lot of fine arts institutions, the Met has been struggling with graying audiences and tectonic shifts in popular tastes. (“I don’t think most people in the general population can name an opera singer except Pavarotti — and he’s been dead for 20 years,” Mark Gould, a former member of the Met’s orchestra, told the Times.)

The Met has been trying a lot of things to counter the trend, from staging more popular war horses to seeking a collaboration with Saudi Arabia to considering [selling its iconic tapestries by Marc Chagall](#). But its general manager, Peter Gelb, admits what the company really needs: “one of these triple-digit billionaires to give us a billion dollars.”

I suspect that is exactly what Chalamet was worried about: He seemed to be saying that he wants film to thrive as a mass entertainment, eschewing the nonprofit (in both senses of the word) nature of the fine arts. He’s made interesting and independent films, but wants them to sink or swim on the basis of their inherent popularity, not because a benefactor is propping up the industry. And to his credit, Chalamet has attached his name and fame to risk-taking films that aren’t just sequels or superhero epics.

His remarks sound mercenary, and they are, but they are also honest and populist. It doesn't make you a philistine if you want to reach a mass audience, or guide your industry to where the audiences are.

So instead of attacking Chalamet as a lightweight or telling him how he's wrong, it may be an occasion to Defend the Niche. Which brings me back to Shabbat. When Gelb took over at the Met in 2006, I wrote a piece about how opera and Conservative Judaism were facing the same challenges. Both were losing market share, both had aging audiences and both were under pressure to innovate or fade away.

At the time, Gelb responded to critics who said his vision for bringing in new audiences might turn off opera lovers who showed up for the traditional. "We've been very busy making changes, changes not for the sake of change but for the sake of keeping the art form vibrant and exciting," [Gelb said at the time](#).

That's familiar language to rabbis and synagogue administrators and Jewish leaders who are trying to engage younger members. The particular challenge for the centrist Conservative movement, like the opera, is to balance the need for change with a commitment to tradition — attracting new audiences without alienating the ones they have. That affects everything from form — how innovative you want to be with synagogue services that on a Saturday morning can run as long as an opera — to ideology, as seen in the [decades-long internal wrangling over accepting interfaith families and performing interfaith weddings](#).

But while every movement wants to thrive and grow — and some are thriving and growing more than others — Judaism remains a counterculture. And thank heavens for that. You can enjoy a blockbuster movie like "Avatar: The Way of Water" but also find deep meaning in leaving the beaten path, guided by your own instincts rather than by fashion or popularity. There is great satisfaction in small communities, in rituals handed down and cultivated, and in passions pursued deeply rather than widely.

It's a path a lot of people are looking for, even if they haven't found the one that's right for them. The Jewish text I quote most often in this regard is "Seinfeld," Season 3, Episodes 17 & 18, when George finds out that former Mets great Keith Hernandez is a Civil War buff. "I'd love to be a Civil War buff," says George. "What do you have to do to become a buff?"

I can't pretend that Saturday morning services are an easy sell, even when they are serving meat at kiddush. And so far, I have failed to see the charms of contemporary opera. But niches can be worthwhile in themselves, especially if they are connected to a longstanding cultural tradition, and have the self-confidence to innovate. Communities of shared values, however small or esoteric, are antidotes to a broad, impersonal society.

I'm guessing Timothée Chalamet gets this: He was raised in a performing arts family (with [members who might have spent a morning or two at synagogue](#)) and has to know that most actors work in small venues for tiny audiences — and do so thanks to the largesse of donors to the arts.

Maybe that's the takeaway from my Saturday: Niche spaces matter because they are niche spaces. They require impassioned supporters, enthusiastic regulars, the curious visitor and the occasional infusion of new blood and ideas. The mass audience isn't the point. The point is devotion, community and the quiet joy of being part of something small but enduring.

And the kiddush. Always the kiddush.