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The Washington Post

Quarantined actors, empty seats, temperature checks: Planning for a socially distanced — and pricey — return to live performances

By Geoff Edgers and Peggy McGlone
April 28, 2020 at 5:24 p.m. EDT



At time of publication, City Winery D.C. did not have a picture of their space available. Pictured is their performance space in Chicago which the Washington venue is modeled after. (City Winery Chicago)

They already had the drone footage, shot years ago for planning purposes, showing virtually every patch of lawn on the Boston Symphony Orchestra's 529-acre summer campus. In the old normal, 13,000 picnic-basket-toting patrons would pack that green space to see James Taylor, Yo-Yo Ma or Mahler's Ninth at the Tanglewood Music Center.

So it was easy, earlier this month, for the organization's emergency task force to map out a seating chart that incorporated social-distancing guidelines — six feet apart — and knocked capacity below 4,000.

At the Kennedy Center, with a June opening of "Hamilton" in the 2,300-seat Opera House seeming unlikelier with each covid-19 spike, there has been a renewed focus on offering other programming at the organization's

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more intimate annex, the Reach, “since crowds of 50 might be okay but 2,000 might not be,” Chairman David Rubenstein says.

And at City Winery, the upscale concert venue and restaurant with outposts in New York, Washington and five other cities, owner Michael Dorf is considering several paths to reopen as part of a theoretical new normal. What if they go from 300 to 150 seats, spread out the tables and book performers who normally play arenas? City Winery could jack up ticket prices to as much as \$800 and also charge for a stream, which would only widen the gap between those who can afford a ticket and those sitting at home.

“The preciousness of the live experience has become more valuable,” says Dorf. “I have talked to a couple of agents who represent some artists that I would love to have in our space and I was pitching them on this idea. And I was not hung up on as some ranting small-venue lunatic.”

Even as a few states began reopening some businesses this week, it remains unclear how long it will be before health experts declare it safe to send kids back to school, never mind cram ticket-buyers into sweaty arenas, concert halls or even performances of Shakespeare in the park. But desperate programmers across the country, and across disciplines, have been assembling in virtual war rooms to contemplate every possible scenario.

The launching of this new normal is a sensitive one as the deadly novel coronavirus continues to cut through the country. That’s why the Boston Symphony’s president, Mark Volpe, politely declined to release the socially distanced map of Tanglewood this week. If they move ahead with that scenario, one of several being considered for 2020, he also doesn’t know exactly how the orchestra will deal with concession stands, bathroom access and whether ticket prices will remain the same.



Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah performs at City Winery in Washington. (Photo by Kyle Gustafson/for The Washington Post)

“We don’t want to create false hope,” says Volpe. “Part of the real conundrum, the challenge, is to balance hope with, frankly, medical reality.”

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For Volpe and larger nonprofits, some of them with reserve funds and savings to draw from — the Boston Symphony's endowment was \$479 million as of Dec. 31 — there is a buffer. They don't have to pack a theater just to stay in business.

The American Repertory Theater at Harvard University said this week it's possible that it won't return to its performance space in Cambridge, Mass., until 2021 or even later. As a first step, the theater is partnering with the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health to create a road map for a return that it will update on its website.

"It's not just about big regional theaters," says Diane Paulus, the ART's artistic director. "I think about high schools across America. How can we think of ways to help people? What's great is that we're backing this up with science."

To that end, the ART's next performance could be as soon as this summer in Boston's Arnold Arboretum, a public park large enough for an audience to gather without being packed too closely. Paulus said work has begun on a new free production for that space.

In the commercial theater world, the options are more limited. For an industry already operating on razor-thin margins, distancing guidelines make a quick return almost impossible. Don't expect to stretch out at a performance of "The Lion King" this summer.

"It makes no sense for us to open to 50 percent houses," says Charlotte St. Martin, the president of the Broadway League, a trade association that represents theater owners, producers and others in the industry. "We'll be closed in two weeks."

And adapting big music tours to the new normal presents its own challenges.

Rick Mueller, the North American president for entertainment presenter AEG Presents, has been sending out offers for the fall but says he also would not be surprised if artists such as Pearl Jam, the Rolling Stones and Taylor Swift, as well as rock festivals currently postponed until later in 2020, remain sidelined until late 2021. This week, Foo Fighters moved their planned summer dates in Europe to 2021.

"How do you enforce social distancing when the lights go down and people want to go near the stage?" he says. "I'm not saying that people don't have self-control, but occasionally you get lost in the moment. And I still say, how do you get in and out of the venues?"

Another consideration is the artists. Will Billie Eilish or the Who want to play to a half-empty arena? And what about the health risks of going out on the road? Graham Nash, 78, says he doesn't care how much they pay him. He's staying home.

"We have to protect our audience, we have to protect my crew, and we have to protect me," says Nash, who was in the midst of a theater tour in March when he had to come off the road. "I'd need to know that with all the testing that was done, with all the things being done to combat this virus, it has to be dead. It has to have disappeared from communities. I don't think that's going to be soon."

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Not everyone is taking such a hard line. Country star Garth Brooks said this week that “the second they let us go, we’ll do it.” The Reverend Horton Heat, the Texas-based psychobilly rocker whose real name is Jim Heath, was not pleased back in March when his gigs were canceled. At the time, Heath, 61, urged his fans to “push back. Write emails and call your local government agencies to remind them that we have the right to assembly. They can’t stop rock and roll.”

That actually isn’t true. Since early March, Heath’s only performances have been through a live stream.

He doesn’t like the idea of smaller shows with ticket prices in the hundreds of dollars. The idea of temperature checks at the door and contact tracing makes him feel uneasy. That sounds Orwellian.

“We’re already in an elitist situation with these concert tickets,” he says. “Only rich people will be able to go to the shows.”

With concerts canceled around the globe, there has been a flood of shows online. The weekly jam band festival Live From Out There has brought in more than \$300,000 to benefit the music charity Sweet Relief. And leaders at the 92nd Street Y, a New York cultural center, say they’ve been surprised by the response to their online programming. Classical music concerts that might sell 200 seats on average have been drawing tens of thousands of viewers for live streams, many of them from outside the region and even the country. A single streamed performance by pianist Jonathan Biss last month had 283,542 views. The organization has also moved 267 classes online, including private music lessons and art instruction for children and adults. Revenue is down from its typical \$5 million a month, but the organization’s CEO, Seth Pinsky, says he’s been encouraged by the more than \$300,000 of new money that’s come in since the Y’s physical doors closed in mid-March.

“As difficult as this situation has been, we’ve learned a ton of lessons, and already we’re finding that there are ways for us to reach new audiences that we had never tried before,” says Pinsky.

Others aren’t so bullish about this new stage.

At the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, known for high-level presentations of everything from Shakespeare to contemporary works, Artistic Director Joseph Haj has resisted suggestions that he pump archival material onto the Internet.

“People are like, what about opening the archives?” says Haj. “The archives are a single camera in the back of the room. It’s a disaster. I’m not making a global judgment. I’m just thinking that, for the Guthrie, I don’t feel the need to flood our community with content for this moment.”

The problem, he says, is that he also isn’t sure how to plot out a downscaled return. He can leave empty seats between audience members as a buffer, but what about the people onstage?

“I just don’t see a path, for the moment, to getting a play on that asks actors to be within inches or a foot and a half of one another and having an audience that can be three feet apart from one another,” he says. “How are you funneling people through the lobby spaces?”

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“I think at the center of the problem is that the very premise of our art form centers around our gathering together as a community, and it’s hard to imagine what a theater looks like if we can’t gather as a community.”

In Cedar City, Utah, the Utah Shakespeare Festival has announced that it will return in July, launching a scaled-back season with quarantined actors, seating capped at 50 percent of the house and potential temperature checks for patrons.

The festival’s plan comes with a caveat: The current six-foot distancing guidelines would probably cap the 700-seat theater at 75 playgoers. They’d need substantially reduced distancing to get to a workable 50 percent of capacity.

Even at that scale, costs will need to be reduced. The overall number of productions will be cut from nine to five. Productions will be stripped down, with minimal sets and costumes. A typical company of 300 people — actors, designers, and stagehands — will be reduced to 80, and the season budget will decrease to \$5 million from \$7.5 million. Earned income projections — mostly from ticket sales — have been reduced to \$1 million, down from \$4 million.

Actors will arrive June 15 and will be self-quarantined — in company housing — for two weeks. Some remote rehearsing will occur during that period.

“We are taking a financial risk by producing the season that we may end up canceling,” says executive producer Frank Mack, noting that even if the shortened season goes up, it could result in losses.

Along with every other unknown, he concedes that nobody knows when audiences will be comfortable returning. A Pew Research Center poll stated that three-quarters of U.S. adults believe that the worst is still coming from the coronavirus and that 61 percent are more concerned with the health threat than financial issues or the impact of isolation.

Trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, who also serves as artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, thinks a lot about fear these days. It’s a powerful force.

“Even though all the evidence says flying is safe, I have a fear that will make me drive 40 hours to a gig,” he says. “When you are afraid, the truth doesn’t matter.”

This hasn’t been an easy time for Marsalis. Earlier this month, his father, Ellis, died at 85 of covid-19. And Jazz at Lincoln Center has been doing its best to replace its live programming with a virtual gala, online chats with Marsalis and even new compositions crafted over the Internet.

But when Marsalis is asked about when he may perform in front of a crowd, he pictures himself back onstage in July.

“As soon as it’s not endangering people to be onstage,” he says. “We’re going to be responsible and make good decisions.”