

An Adjustable Lens: A conversation with Burbage Theatre Company's Jeff Church



Those of us in the performing arts are finding ourselves facing a new reality. As a member of the theater community, I'm lucky enough to be able to speak with leaders of artistic organizations all over the state about how they're coping and what their plans are for the future, and I think it's important we start having those conversations in more open forums, which is why I'm grateful my friend **Jeff Church** was able to speak with me this week. Jeff is the Artistic Director of the **Burbage Theatre Company** in Pawtucket.

Kevin Broccoli (Motif): First off, how are you doing right now?

Jeff Church: Doing alright. Thank you for asking. The Burbage crew is well and healthy, which we're very thankful for, and we're brainstorming new content, which is exciting — still thriving under the surface.

KB: Burbage was just about to open a show when everything shut down, and it was a highly anticipated production of Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room, or The Vibrator Play*. How determined are you to revive that production in the future?

JC: I can tell you that *In the Next Room* is a delight. I'm confident our production would bring more than a few smiles to our audience, even in these troubled times. As of now, the set is still up and we fully intend to produce *In the Next Room* as soon as we are able — that being said, there is still a lot up in the air. Everything is in flux. If extending the run of *In the Next Room* means moving into what would normally be our next season, or further into the fall/winter months, we will have to reevaluate. We're hopeful that we can start making some limited, but definite, programming decisions within the next month or so. Time will tell. Updates to come.

KB: Your outdoor production of *Julius Caesar* last year got an acclaimed reception. Do you think it'll be possible to do an outdoor production this summer as of now?

JC: I do think it's possible! We're hoping that our third annual outdoor Shakespeare event will indeed run this August, for free and open to the public. We have tentative dates with the City of Pawtucket, and are hoping to set tentative dates with the East Providence Arts Council in coming weeks. It appears more and more like outdoor events will allow for audiences to appropriately socially distance, as the virus is not as transmissible outside. That being said, this decision will be made over the course of the next few weeks as we track how the process of reopening goes in Rhode Island. Know that in the meantime, we are working to create a plan that will mean the safest possible reopening of our programming sometime this year.

KB: Every week, you've been hosting an online series of interviews with your company members. What other digital programming have you been thinking about curating? Do you think it's reasonable as we move further into this pandemic to see digital content as a gap until we can have gatherings again?

JC: We pride ourselves on being irreverent whenever possible, so we're working on some digital comedy — mostly short-form kind of stuff. We could all use a bit of comedy right now (I feel like I've said this repeatedly since 2016, but it's true now more so than ever). We may even dip a bit into the political — but we'll see where that goes in the coming weeks. There's a lot being said about 'personal freedom' these last [— well, four years, but —] eight weeks. Some of it reveals cracks in the system, but the rest is nonsense and in direct conflict with our democratic system. We're hoping to poke some fun when we can.

Digital content is tricky. I'd qualify it as a stop-gap, but digital content can never fill the gap of live theater. That is the point — it's live. It's visceral. Theater happens right in front of you. An act of theatre is an act of communion, where people come together and, whether you be in front or behind the footlights, we collectively commit to a story being told. Digital content cannot replace this fundamental — *intrinsic* element of the theater. For that reason I can tell you that Burbage will not stage otherwise theatrical work digitally — we're not bringing our plays to the small screen. It would be a disservice to both content and form. It would betray more our fear of this situation and our fear for the future of the theater, than to strengthen the theater and bolster our community. Laughs are coming — we'll stop the gap with them for now.

KB: I've been asking a lot of artistic directors about momentum, because it's something I think about a lot. Burbage certainly had a lot of momentum this year with a new space and an incredible run of productions under its belt this season. Are the stories you were telling this season similar to what you think you'll want to return to in the future or does this feel like a reset of sorts?

JC: This is absolutely a reset — I've had to throw away a lot of what was planned for our tenth season. The conversation has changed. As we traverse this pandemic, some things that seemed very important at the turn of the '20s seem much less important, while other ideas are vividly developing on a daily basis. The best plays have something timeless about them, something *indelible* — they seem to speak to all of humanity, or the human condition, human nature, etc, whatever you'd like to call it. They speak to an aspect of us that is incontrovertible — that we all feel at once independently and together with our fellow theater-goers. These plays will stand the test of time, and will remain with us through these particularly troubling times. I believe we have one such play planned for next season, and it will not change. As for the rest, a reevaluation is underway, as I'm sure it is at most theaters.

The conversation, now more than ever, needs to be one of support and inclusion. Every person has been affected by this tragedy, some more than others, and every voice will be essential in bringing the theatrical voice back into the world.

In addition — this pandemic has created such a unique environment — reevaluation is much more than choice of content, it's about the safety of execution. For example, *Junk* by Ayad Ahktar (which was supposed to close out this season and is now slated to open next season) is a *perfect* play for right now, with or without the pandemic. But the cast requires more than 20 actors. Reevaluation becomes less “*Is this story right for now?*” and more “*Can we execute this production and guarantee the safety of its participants?*”

That being said, Burbage will continue to do what Burbage does best — thought-provoking, highly irreverent work. Our lens for viewing humanity is why we continue to thrive — that lens will just have to adjust.

KB: So many of the company's founding members have stayed with the group throughout the years. Has having a core group, along with more recent members, helped create a support system, and how often do you all check in with each other?

JC: Absolutely. We have a meeting once a week where we check in. We're keeping tabs. I'm happy to say that everyone is currently well and healthy and keeping safe. I personally don't know what I'd do without our team during all of this. In a situation where there could be *a lot* to worry about. I'm confident knowing that we're all looking out for each other and for Burbage.

KB: Your new space seems highly flexible. Do you think that's going to be an advantage as the assembly limits are raised gradually? I know you and I have spoken about how even a 50-person limit would still allow for smaller groups to produce shows. The question is—do you feel it's worth it, both financially and creatively, to do that?

JC: Our space is very flexible, and we hope that it will be an advantage should we try to socially distance our audience as assembly limits come up. I'm not worried about the financial implications of opening a production with a smaller audience. We know that we can produce professional quality work on a low budget, the lowest of budgets, even. If we can produce the work, it will be of the highest creative quality we can produce for the time in which we produce it. That won't change. So, yes, I do believe that it would be creatively worth it, outweighing the possible financial hit.

The real question is: *Will anyone come to see the production even with social distancing?*

We can produce as much work as we want, spend as much or as little money as we like, but if no one wants to come out to see a show — it won't be worth it.

Again, I don't have the answer to this question. But, rest assured, we're looking into it.

In spite of all of this, I'm confident that the community will be itching for something and that we can make something happen, in some capacity.

KB: It seems as though right now most performing artists either feel they can't create or they have to create, but they're searching for a way to do that. Did you experience any creative numbness when all this started? How have you managed mentally and emotionally running a theater throughout all of this?

JC: I had my moment of creative numbness — before all of this, making theater, acting and directing occupied my *literal every waking hour* — and then, the evening of *In the Next Room's* first preview performance, it all stopped. Immediately and abruptly.

I've since learned two things:

1) Acceptance is an essential and invaluable tool — the ability to accept things as they are. Employing reason in an effort to acknowledge that a situation simply *is what it is* can relieve a lot of mental and emotional strain. I'm not a terribly religious person, but I refer to the serenity prayer — “may I have the serenity to accept what cannot be helped the courage to change what must be altered, and the insight to know the one from the other” — wiser words.

2) An artist doesn't need to *create* to stimulate creativity — in other words: Read a book. Read a play. Read all of Shakespeare's plays. Use Kahn Academy. Learn another language. *Something. Commit to learning something.* Strengthen the creative muscle by *stimulating* it. Use this time to fill your brain with inspiration.

These two things are certainly easier said than done — but just *accept* that, and do your best.

KB: I know you and I both like checking in with each other and with other theaters in the area to see how everyone is coping and what ideas they have about moving forward. Is there any piece of advice or insight you've gotten that you're holding onto right now, or is there advice you could give to a newer company that might not have as much experience under their belt as they try to handle being thrown such a big curve ball?

JC: *Patience is a virtue* — good one for right now, certainly.

Otherwise, keep fighting. Find strength in community. Seek out advice directly. And use time productively.

KB: How can people help the theater right now? What are the donation links, and is there anything else they can do other than staying home and staying safe?

JC: Staying home and staying safe and healthy are of paramount importance right now.

If you want to help the theater in general, consider making a donation to your favorite theaters. Every dollar given goes a very long way. It reads like a cliché — but right now, it couldn't be more true.

Then keep updated with us as best you can. A lot of online content also means a great deal of direct interaction with artists in the community — take advantage of that.

Major theaters across the globe are posting world-class productions online for free — watch some professional theater from the comfort of your home. (It's also good to note that watching theater on a screen will remind you of the power of live performance in its absence.) *Keep engaged.*

But ensuring that the theater survives this ordeal isn't only about us doing what we can to keep the doors open. Wash your hands, wear your mask, don't go out unless absolutely necessary. Listen to our leaders.

Theater needs an audience. Staying well and healthy, and doing our part to ensure we don't jeopardize the health and safety of others is the only foolproof way to guarantee the theater's return.

Donation link — [Burbage Theatre Company](#)

Women's Work Is Never Done: A Conversation with WWTC's Lynne Collinson



Those of us in the performing arts are finding ourselves facing a new reality. As a member of the theater community, I'm lucky enough to be able to speak with leaders of artistic organizations all over

the state about how they're coping and what their plans are for the future, and I think it's important we start having those conversations in more open forums, which is why I'm grateful my friend **Lynne Collinson** was able to speak with me this week. Lynne Collinson is one of the Founding Mothers of **WomensWork Theatre Collaborative (WWTC)** in Cranston.

WWTC shares a space with my theater company, Epic, at the Artists' Exchange on Rolfe Square. We're creative neighbors, and I love having all of them close by because they're made up of some of the most talented women in the state. Other Founding Mothers include Carol Schlink, Rae Mancini, Juli Parker, Gayle Hanrahan, Peggy Becker, Joanne Fayan, Margaret Melozzi, MJ Daly, Paula Faber and Sharon Carpentier. Their group is dedicated to serving an often overlooked demographic by tackling work by and for women over 40. They're also a newer company on the scene, and I was curious to see what it's like for a group that's just getting started, especially one that's gotten such positive feedback from the community for productions like *My Left Breast*, *Last Lists of My Mad Mother* and *The Madwoman in the Volvo*.

Here's what Lynne had to say:

Kevin Broccoli (Motif): First off, how are you doing right now?

Lynne Collinson: I'm well — fighting bits of anxiety, like everyone else. Stepping away from the computer and out into the fresh air helps.

KB: I know that WWTC is unique in that it's a real collective where there's a lot of collaboration and input from all the Founding Mothers. Have you all been keeping in touch as things have progressed to make decisions and come up with plans for the future?

LC: Luckily, performances of *The Madwoman in the Volvo* got in just under the wire in March. We've been on hold since then, but we have a Zoom meeting scheduled soon. It'll be good to connect and brainstorm. There are 11 of us, so there'll be lots of great ideas to collectively find our way forward.

KB: Your production of *Hitler's Tasters* by Michelle Kholos Brooks was postponed due to the pandemic. Are you still planning on producing that when you have an opportunity to do so?

LC: It broke my heart to postpone *Hitler's Tasters*, and I hope WomensWork will still produce it when the time is right. Written by a woman, with an all-female cast, the play is a powerful story set during World War II, but the similarities to today are startling. There's lots of humor - selfies and talk of movies stars - but danger is ever present. It's a play I feel passionately about bringing to our audiences.

KB: WWTC's work is geared toward creating theater for and with women over the age of 40. Has having a specific demographic in mind informed how you're looking ahead right now?

LC: The over-40 female demographic is always front and center for us, because women are often devalued just as they reach the height of their talent and expertise. WomensWork wants to amplify voices of women of all ages, while putting the decision-making in the hands of older women. Looking ahead, the WomensWork team will search for and select plays they want to direct, design, act in, work on and bring to the audience. And with women over 40 picking the plays, you can be sure the focus will stay fixed on finding opportunities for older women.

KB: Of all the groups I'm checking in on, WWTC is the one that was formed more recently, even though its artists are all local luminaries. Is it particularly difficult to have to take a pause so early in the group's journey?

LC: It's frustrating to pause just as we're hitting our stride. We had a successful soft open last year with *My Left Breast*, but this was our first full season. Both *Last Lists of My Mad Mother* and *The Madwoman in the Volvo* were well received, we were finding our footing, getting our message out, and building momentum. WomensWork is all about stepping up instead of sitting back, so it was hard to hit the brakes.

KB: What do you think the gap is going to look like between the time when the government says it's safe to do theater again versus when audiences will actually be comfortable going to the theater again? Do you think this will have a permanent effect on theater attendance?

LC: There may be a long gap before we feel safe coming together in tight quarters, but we need to gather. I keep thinking of my kids sitting in a circle at story-time at the library years ago. Whether we sit in a story circle or staggered seats in a black box, we need to share our stories together in the same space. Necessity will make us re-imagine or re-configure that space, but theater folk are resourceful - we'll figure something out. Attendance could suffer in the short term because of safety concerns, but theater will go on. It has to.

KB: I know you've had an incredible career both onstage and off. As someone whose spent a significant amount of time behind-the-scenes looking at the business side of theater, how are you feeling about what it's going to take to make it to the end of the tunnel with many theaters still financially intact? Is this something organizations can withstand?

LC: The business of theater is precarious in the best of times, and I fear for the large institutions with

payroll, lease, utility, insurance and other ongoing obligations. Small theaters that live lean have better odds for survival. It's especially tough in a little state where so many are competing for a small pool of donors and grant funding. I hope for everyone's survival, but dark days are ahead.

The immediate future is likely minimalist - small cast shows, spare sets, limited seating, tight finances. WomensWork specializes in intimate, small cast plays, professionally produced on shoestring budgets, so we'll be ready as soon as it's safe.

KB: Has having to be away from theater changed your mind about what kind of future projects you want to work on? For all of us, losing time to be pursuing our passions is difficult, but do you think it's going to force us to start to prioritize the kinds of plays we produce, act in and direct?

LC: These lock-down days have given me plenty of time to examine my artistic priorities. I keep coming back to the cliché "Women's work is never done." Our stories need to be told, and I want to help tell them in a collaborative process that nurtures, encourages and empowers women. I want to work again, as soon as I can, and I want every play I work on to be worthy of being my last project. I want to fully invest in it, to be proud of the effort - whether it succeeds or fails. Another priority will be watching lots of work by local artists - I think I miss that most of all.

KB: Has WWTC thought about venturing into the digital content realm? Have you had conversations with the other Founding Mothers about that?

LC: Digital programming is open for discussion. I applaud the effort of theaters to put out content and stay connected, but I'm old school. I've enjoyed watching it, but it doesn't replace what I'm missing - live theater. Some of the Founding Mothers are more tech savvy than I am, and they'll drive the decision-making in this area.

KB: How can people help the theater right now? What are the donation links, and is there anything else they can do other than staying home and staying safe?

LC: We can raise awareness by liking and sharing the social media posts of our favorite arts groups. Most of us can't financially support all the organizations we support emotionally, so pick one or two, and give what you can.

WomensWork is lucky to have a place to play without the burden of a lease, thanks to The Artists'

Exchange, an organization that champions arts for all abilities. You can donate to this worthy organization at artists-exchange.org

And vote. Please vote.

[A Toast!: RKO Army Raises \\$4,100 for RI Pride Food Drive](#)

[“The Rocky Horror Stay-at-Home Show”](#) was an online event on May 8 that raised more than \$4,100 for the RI Pride Emergency Supply Drive, a COVID-19 relief program that provides boxes containing a one-week supply of food and hygiene supplies to those in need.

After *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* film was released in 1975 to box office disappointment, within a few years it was running at midnight every Friday night to Saturday morning in Greenwich Village in New York City, and audiences evolved the practices of shouting “callbacks” at the screen, then “shadowcasting” by dressing in character and acting out scenes in front of the screen, and eventually throwing objects such as toast and toilet paper at appropriate moments.

The fan phenomenon spread to other large cities and college towns, and by 1981 the ancestor of the RKO Army was performing in RI at venues in Providence and Newport, according to current cast director Roy Rossi who has been involved since the beginning and maintains a [history page](#) on the web. In recent years, the RKO Army has become known as a major shadowcast with an international reputation, hosting the worldwide Rocky Horror conventions in Providence in 2013, 2016 and 2019, as well as having announced plans for 2022.

The pandemic show was possible, despite rules under an emergency executive order in RI limiting gatherings to no more than five people, because seven members of the [RKO Army](#) theater troupe live in the same house. Reminiscent of [Oakley Court](#), the 118-bedroom British castle used as the set for the original film, the house in Providence is a 5,700 square-foot Victorian-style mansion with three floors plus basement, seven bedrooms, three bathrooms and two living rooms, enclosed by a white picket fence mounted on stonework.



RKO Army cast for RI Pride fundraiser: (standing L-R) Lukas H, Cassia, Diz, Gregory Lane; (kneeling) Ray Zombie, (on floor L-R) Zephyr Goza, Harley Bean

Cassia, who organized the show, explained that her household is an “intentional community,” a broad term to describe living arrangements as varied as a Benedictine Monastery or an Israeli kibbutz. “Our household has grown from an idea to a bunch of people living in a crappy apartment to a bunch of people living in a less crappy place to here. The long story short is that Zephyr and I had actually gone to a summer camp ... and that was where I got introduced to a lot of new ideas. It was for people who were homeschooled and unschooled. Basically, that’s how I met Zephyr. But that was the place where I got introduced to the idea of, hey, you actually can, you know, live in a house with a whole bunch of your close friends. And then I went to another session of the same camp and they actually took us to an intentional community ... it was very different. It was a bunch of different little individual houses on a bigger property that had a main building and everything, but it was still the idea that you could choose to live with people who you actually really want to live with and not just random housemates or family or whoever you happen to live with. We are growing our household, a little bit bigger and bigger.”

Cassia said that she and Zephyr were the first housemates in 2009, joined by Greg in 2010 and Ray in

2012, both of whom she met through Rocky Horror, then Diz from college, then Lukas through a friend, and then most recently Harley again through Rocky Horror. "It has become this family. Everybody, almost everybody, ends up being either somebody we met through Rocky Horror or somebody who gets dragged into Rocky Horror: They fall in with us and they go 'Hey, that looks kind of cool, you know?' That's how this all developed into this perfect environment for being stuck in your house during the pandemic and doing Rocky Horror on the internet."

The concept was motivated by other Rocky Horror casts arranging virtual shows, either individual performers recording parts separately so they could be consolidated or participating simultaneously by a video conferencing system such as Zoom. "I took a whole night, basically, and came up with a spreadsheet for how would this even work? Like what exactly would I be asking them to do? Because you really need eight actors to do Rocky Horror: You need somebody for Frank, Brad, Janet, Riff, Magenta, Columbia. Eddie and Dr. Scott can be [played by] one person. And then you need Rocky. And that's eight. So there's seven of us," Cassia said. It was a lot more complicated than a normal show, she said. The Criminologist character, who never interacts with the other characters in the film version, was rotated among the cast. The Usherette who sings the overture "Science Fiction Double Feature," commonly known in the US as "Trixie" and in the UK as "Miss Strawberry Time," was played by Cassia.

Because they were short one essential cast member, the household employed its cats to fill in occasional roles, putting them in different bedrooms until they were needed "on stage." Cassia said, "It had kind of been jokingly suggested a whole bunch before. I mean, I think a lot of people who own cats and do Rocky Horror, think of, if your cat is going to be a part, what would they play? Everybody - not everybody, but a lot of people who have cats - want to insert them into Rocky Horror... and then it was scenes like Dinner Scene where you have eight people who are actively on screen at the same time, which was just not possible no matter how we switch characters, and I was 'Okay, we can either completely ignore that this character exists, which is difficult because in Dinner Scene, every single one of them does something... And then we have cats who could actually get to do some of these things and carry them around, and they're cute, and some of them are kind of like their counterparts. So that was how that happened out of necessity.'" She was concerned the cats-as-performers might not go over well. "I was really worried that everybody was going to hate it and be like, 'Oh my God, you couldn't do Rocky Horror by yourselves. You needed to add cats. This isn't a real show. You're just substituting cats in.' So I was really stressed out about that. And then everybody loved the cats. I was like, oh, thank God. I should never have doubted the power of cats."

The house happens to be located only a few buildings away from a church, which was used as a location for the Wedding Scene that opens the movie. "I wish I could have captured the look on Lukas's face when I was talking about 'Do you want to actually draw on the church door? Do you want to actually do wedding scene in front of a church?' It was just like Christmas. Everybody was really excited about being able to use these really site-specific things," Cassia said. (In the film, Brad draws with chalk a heart for Janet, and immediately afterward the sexton rubs it off with a rag.) Driving Scene was performed using a real car parked in the street at the curb.

Although the performance was pre-recorded because of concerns with technical issues including internet connectivity, most of it was shot as a continuous take to give the feeling of a live stage experience. Cassia said furniture and decorations were rearranged in the house “to transform it as much as we could into this complete feeling of being a Rocky Horror set. We didn’t want it to be, there was one room that you ran through and it truly felt like you were pulled out of it. We want it to be one complete thing you really could feel... Never feel like, ‘Oh, I’m removed from the show. This is just somebody’s house. This isn’t a whole show anymore.’ But it was a really good mix of being a show and being somebody’s house, which I think was really cool.” For Dinner Scene, Harley “decked out the room with a whole bunch of merch from other casts and the cape that they made for the punk show that’s all the T-shirts put together,” Cassia said. “We had a fake electric chair that... was from another Rocky household... We just had it in our yard and somebody had the idea of ‘What if the electric chair was the throne?’”

The fundraising aspect emerged in stages, according to Cassia. The RKO Army has a long and cordial history with RI Pride, entering a tractor-trailer sized float every June in Pride’s Illuminated Night Parade that had to be indefinitely postponed because of the pandemic. Originally RKO had a regular performance scheduled on May 8, but that had to be canceled due to the pandemic. Then the plan was to perform a virtual show online, once it was realized the household had enough people living there to pull it off. “We already had the show pretty lined up for me to pitch the show to [cast director] Roy and talk to the rest of the cast about it. There was an event page for it, you had this plan. That was gonna be a regular show. And then I was on Facebook, and I’m friends with Alijah [Dickenson] on Facebook, and she’s been posting about how the food supply drive had just completely run dry. At this point, they had nothing left. And she was really trying to get donations for the supply drive because she didn’t really know how they were going to continue otherwise.” Cassia was donating to and sharing other benefit shows, “And then I just had this moment of prepping for the show and thinking about this and I just went, ‘Oh, there’s all these other places that have been doing this as a benefit like we could do this event.’ So I pitched it to the housemates and said, ‘Hey, are you interested in taking it in this direction?’ and they were super excited. So then I went to Roy, and Roy was super excited. And then I went to Alijah, and she cried and was super excited. So it turned into this thing that was even cooler than the really cool show we were already doing. It just took something that was awesome and just made it incredible.”

The original goal, Cassia said, was \$1,000 with what she called a “stretch goal” of \$1,500. How did she feel when the total passed \$4,100 shortly after the show? “I really did not even fully process it until later on that night when I was getting ready for bed, and then I just really thought about it and just started sobbing. It’s just incredible. I can’t wrap my head around it. I cannot wrap my head around the fact that this just came out of a silly idea... It’s so far beyond what I had hoped for, and I am so happy, and just reading everybody’s comments during the show, too, people’s responses to it were so much more positive than I had imagined. There were people commenting saying, ‘This important person in my life just died, and this is the first time that I’ve smiled in a while.’ It just was so overwhelmingly positively received, and the audience was so excited about raising all of this money for Pride, and they were really in it, and it was just incredible to have this level of engagement with an audience at a time when we’re all so removed from each other, and have this group of people who was really excited about raising money and sharing this with their friends and matching donations. And it was incredible. It was

incredible. I cried a lot. There were a lot of happy tears. I'm not gonna lie."

The web cast side of the show was donated by Chris Trainor using the site he created for the RKO Army conventions, rkolive.tv. (*Disclosure: Trainor is the former business partner and colleague of the author, going back to the internet pioneering era in the 1980s.*) With a professional technical infrastructure subcontracted to commercial providers including Teradek Core Cloud, Wowza Streaming Cloud, and Akamai Content Delivery Network, Trainor provided a high-quality 2TB feed to about 1,000 simultaneous viewers, approximately 90% from the US but also from the UK, Canada, France, Australia, Germany, Austria, Ukraine, Italy, Macedonia, Mexico, Poland, Sweden and Thailand.

Cassia said, "One of the people who is involved with our cast recently, Dana, she lives in Germany and she went back to Germany very recently. She messaged me earlier on in the day saying that she was about to take a long nap so she could wake up and watch it in the middle of the night! And it was just incredible. Chris was sending me the statistics for where people were watching and I was like, I have no idea who in the world is watching from there. Who are all these people? But it was just insane. Ken [Barber] told me we had donations from 17 different states and Canada and London. So there was really support from all over the world and I don't know where all of it came from, but I'm really glad it did."

"RI Pride has been able to feed individuals at a rate of \$6 per week due to nonprofit bulk pricing," Vice President of Operations Ken Barber said in a [statement](#). The organization describes itself as "the largest and most comprehensive LGBTQIA+ community non-profit serving Rhode Island and its surrounding neighbors," but the Emergency Supply Drive is open to everyone without discrimination, and there are links on the PrideRI.org website to request assistance, volunteer or donate. (The donation link is tinyurl.com/PrideSupplyDrive which forwards to Kindful, a payment processor for non-profits). The \$4,100 raised by the Rocky Horror event works out to be enough to feed just over 683 people for a week.

Alijah Dickenson, the program manager of the Emergency Supply Drive, was the principal point of contact working with Cassia to make the fundraiser happen. She said it is all-volunteer, so every bit of money that comes in from donation goes out to beneficiaries, with the work handled by a core team of 10 aided by 168 volunteers who do everything from packing to delivering boxes. "We're going on our ninth week right now of operation. No one in Rhode Island Pride has ever done anything like this before. Our 'Mr. Gay Rhode Island 2019' Bret Jacob had this idea in the middle of the night, he's like, 'We have to do something, we have to be able to support not only the LGBTQI-plus community but also support the entire Rhode Island community in general during this time,' and the way that he thought we could do it is start a food drive. So it started with a couple cans in the Pride office."

Gotham Greens donates the actual boxes, Dickenson said, and in each box "we try and have a cereal, eggs, milk, butter, fresh produce that we have normally: apples, oranges, onions, potatoes and then lettuce provided by Gotham Greens, they also donate lettuce to us. And then we get mac and cheese

pasta, pasta sauce, ramen, canned vegetables, soup, rice, beans, anything we can really get our hands on to make sure that there there can be about a week's worth of food to sustain a family."

Prior to the Rocky Horror fundraiser, total donations were \$44,276 from individuals and \$38,850 from organizational grants, so the \$4,100 from the Rocky Horror event is substantial. Most of the individual donations, she said, were in connection with virtual events, including three drag queen shows and a drag king show. "A lot of the credit goes to the artists in the community who have said, 'I want to do a virtual show, let's do a virtual show and try and raise money.'" As of the time of the show when we spoke with Dickenson, the program had served 10,452 individual and 2,834 family recipients. "The data tracker for us was saying that he couldn't keep up with the amount of donations coming in and I have a feeling it's because not everyone has a lot to give, but everyone had a little to give. And so I think that was part of the the lag on the tracking end is that there were just so many people willing to give a couple dollars here and there."

Demand has been so great for the program getting food out to recipients that they ran out of cash on Thursday, April 30. "Our grants ran out and we hadn't really gotten any donations, and we basically hit zero. There was a day we were at zero dollars, our shopper came back and there was nothing left. And we were kind of at the point where we said, 'Well, we have a fundraiser, and we'll see where we're at after that.' And we got into the office on Tuesday and said, 'All right, what can we do?' And we said, 'All right, this is the modifications we're going to make, to be able to stretch ourselves a little further and be able to still continue helping people.' So through people's amazing generosity and donations over the weekend, we were able to pick it back up, but at the beginning of it all it seemed day-to-day. Right now we're very much feeling week-to-week, but after [the Rocky Horror fundraiser] tonight, we know we've secured a little bit more time than just worrying about week-to-week."

Dickenson said, "We're getting to June, we're getting to Pride Month, and with Pride being postponed in Rhode Island we're still looking at what we can do in June to celebrate Pride Month. So while we're all in office doing food supply drive stuff, the president, Ray Sirico, and the vice president, Ken Barber, are actively looking at what we can do during Pride Month to be able to celebrate the time, and so they're looking at a few different ways to help engage into the virtual Pride that is happening worldwide, as well as what we can do in Rhode Island to help keep the spirit of Pride alive."

Dickenson continued, "What I think the biggest thing that we've been trying to push is our mission statement of we started this off, not only wanting to bring food into the homes of people in Rhode Island, but also trying to give people hope and bring that to them. So the more we go, the more I feel like we're delivering that promise to people that there are going to be days ahead aren't going to be like this, that we are all together in this. Tonight, being able to really see people rally - and I would note that people who donated tonight, I think this is the first time in our use of fundraising that it really came from all over the country - people were donating to Rhode Island Pride saying that this is something that they believed in and they wish that their community also had, so I'm hoping in the future that other people see what we're doing and take their own leap of faith and start doing something like this

themselves.”

What has this meant for Dickenson personally? “I went in the first week, I think they were three days in or something like that, and I went in to be a delivery driver I signed up to go in, got a couple of boxes and dropped them off at people’s houses. Within the first 24 hours, I was promoted to managing inventory and the warehouse and everything that is involved in terms of what what they were getting in. Then from there, I just kept on doing and being there and given more responsibility to now that I’m the manager of everything. I went into this scared of the future and my mental health wasn’t in the right place. I was sad. I was depressed, I was just trying to get to a place where I didn’t feel so lonely, didn’t feel so afraid. Being here and being able to see the impact that we’ve had, and the support that we’ve had, I’ve been so incredibly happy and grateful and honored and supported and seen. I’m so happy that Pride is being able to be seen for more than just a parade and more than just a party, but a valuable part of the Rhode Island community, the Providence community. So it’s had a impact on my life that I will tell everyone about who I meet, this will be a defining moment in my life. I’m only 24 years old. So to be able to do all this, it makes me speechless to say that I am in charge of being able to deliver food during a pandemic to people who are in need. Personally, it’s done a lot.”

UPDATE: As of May 11, the amount collected has increased to \$4,265.

UPDATE: RKO Army has announced an [encore performance](#) on Saturday, May 23, at 10pm, with entirely new live introduction and follow-up question-and-answer sessions before and after.

(Disclosure: The author has been affiliated with RKO Army since the 1990s and personally contributed to the fundraiser.)

[Trying to Press On: Brown Paper Tickets leaves local theater artists holding the bag](#)



Two weeks after she closed her last show, Gladys Cole reached out to Brown Paper Tickets looking for a check.

“I spoke with Chris S,” says Cole. “He said, ‘Hold on let me speak to my supervisor.’ He came back a few minutes later, and said ‘We are a little behind due to the COVID-19,’ but assured me my check would be in the mail.”

She asked if setting up direct deposit would make the process go faster and was told “Yes.” After completing the direct deposit form and emailing out her information, she waited another few weeks before contacting BPT again, because she still hadn’t received a payment. This time she didn’t get a response, and she hasn’t been able to reach anyone at BPT since then.

Gladys Cole runs a youth theater organization called GCOLE Productions, which presents musicals and other programming with children ages 5 and up. Cole has been using Brown Paper Tickets since 2015 and this is the first time she’s had an issue with them.

According to the BPT website, they’re an “independently owned and operated” ticketing service based out of Seattle that can act as a box office for organizers of events like theater, concerts and pretty much anything you can sell admission to.

Up until recently, I’d never heard of anyone having problems with BPT, and I’d actually used them a few times myself without any trouble. Then Gladys, who in addition to being a colleague also happens to be a friend and an objectively lovely person, reached out to me.

She’s owed nearly \$1,500 from the tickets sold to her last production, a junior production of Disney’s “The Little Mermaid.” After doing some research, it appeared that people all over the country are complaining about not receiving payment from the company.

I should mention that I’m not an investigative journalist, but with arts writing not necessarily a priority at the moment, I offered to try and shine a light on this problem, since theaters and other event organizers are not in a good position to be out money from a company that’s basically supposed to act as a holding account for ticket sales so they can take a percentage of that and send the organizer the rest.

A statement from BPT reads as follows:

“We recognize the burden our system failure has placed on the artists and event organizers we built our business to serve. We apologize, and we are working to make it right.”

They also put out a convoluted explanation for the hold-up that would take a few pages to decipher, but it amounts to-

The pandemic hit and people were cancelling events and offering refunds, and we just put everything on hold.

Here’s why that doesn’t make sense:

If a company is offering to refund people who bought tickets to events that never happened, the easiest thing for BPT to do would be to cut checks for whatever tickets were purchased, send them out to the respective organizers, and let them deal with it from there.

That being said, BPT still hasn’t sent out checks to companies that produced and closed shows before the pandemic even struck. One of those shows is [Carrie](#), the musical that was a collaboration between the Academy Players and me in Providence. I was shocked when I reached out to Academy’s artistic director, Rita Maron, to find out that Academy still hadn’t received the proceeds from that production.

“It just doesn’t add up,” says Maron. “Some of our tickets were bought in December and January for *Carrie*. It’s grossly irresponsible.”

The obvious answer seems to be that BPT was using funds that should have been set aside to pay for other things and now that’s caught up to them, but there’s no proof of that, and the company hasn’t responded to requests for interviews or made any further statements. At the time of this writing, the attorney general in Washington had received numerous complaints and was looking into the matter.

Unfortunately, that doesn’t help theaters and other organizers all over the country who might never see the money they’re owed.

“I am already behind on payments to my vendors,” says Cole, who uses ticket proceeds to cover the costs of putting together a production. She’s planning on filing a complaint with the Rhode Island AG, but in the meantime, she’s on the hook for things like rent and royalties, which means all that needs to

come out of her own pocket when money is already tight for everyone.

It's worth mentioning that some artists did receive checks from BPT only to find out from their banks that those checks bounced.

The arts already feel as if they're hanging on by a thread, and news of a reliable ticketing service imploding is more bad news that makes pressing on seem even more difficult.

[The Liveness of Theater: Performing in a post-coronavirus world](#)



Rebecca Maxfield, artistic director of Head Trick Theatre

Those of us in the performing arts are finding ourselves facing a new reality. As a member of the theater community, I'm lucky enough to be able to speak with leaders of artistic organizations all over the state about how they're coping and what their plans are for the future, and I think it's important we start having those conversations in more open forums, which is why I'm grateful to my friend Rebecca Maxfield for agreeing to speak with me here in an interview for *Motif*.

Rebecca is the artistic director of Head Trick Theatre located in Providence. The company is in resident at 95 Empire Street under the umbrella of AS220 and it was right on the precipice of opening a production when everything had to shut down.

I was excited to check in with her, and this is what she had to say:

Kevin Broccoli: First off, how are you doing right now?

Rebecca Maxfield: Time is meaningless, but I've seen a lot more pretty flowers in my neighborhood than I would have if walks around the neighborhood weren't my only way of getting out of the house.

KB: You were rehearsing for a show, *The Lucky Chance*, when everything shut down. Has there been a discussion about remounting the show?

RM: There sure has. Even before it was officially canceled we were polling people's future availability and talking about options for releasing it digitally. Unfortunately, the regulations came down a little too early for us to release a video of the (staged) show since we couldn't gather as a cast or use the theater space, but we'll be releasing an audio (or probably Zoom, it's nice to see people's faces) version soon. And we're still anticipating getting the gang back together, although we of course don't know if the future dates we originally settled on will work (whether we'll all be allowed to go places again yet, whether AS220 will give us those dates). We have the advantage of doing a lot of public domain work where we don't need to negotiate rights to postpone it or do any kind of online release. (*The Lucky Chance* actually happens to be the only public domain show in our 2019-2020 season because the other two, *Queen Margaret* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, were adaptations, which means that it was also the only one where most of the box office take wasn't going toward paying for the rights. I hope that people who enjoy the digital version will throw some money at us.)

KB: How closely have you been paying attention to some of the proposed guidelines we're starting to hear about how theater can re-open with social distancing guidelines? Do you feel confident that as a smaller theater you could make yours work even with guidelines in place?

RM: It depends on so many things. Our AS220 space is less the size of a supermarket and closer to the size of one of those corner stores that says two customers can come in at a time, so I don't know, is social distancing even possible there? But I honestly haven't been paying close attention to the proposals because it's going to be the venue's call when we can come back. With the margin we run on, we'd definitely have to carefully project future work to minimize expenses if we're going to have to cap audiences in an already tiny space and limit our box office even more. (And also potentially consider doing more performances of shorter material.) Under our current residency arrangement (which gives AS220 the first X amount of the box office take and then a percentage of everything after that), it's up for question whether we'd actually see any of the money, depending on what the restrictions are. So if socially distant audience becomes the rule, I imagine we might want to look into re-negotiating that. Another option for us would be to go back to doing that thing I hate, which is outdoor theater. I mean, *Queen Margaret* this year was our first ever indoor summer show. We did outdoor theater for four years so we know it works.

KB: Right now, I go back and forth about attempting to do another a season for 2020-2021. Where are you with thinking about that?

RM: It sucks! We had our 2020-2021 season planned, though not announced, it very much had a unifying theme, and now nobody knows what's going to happen. The planned fall show is, I'm going to be vague, thematically a little time-sensitive in a way that makes me want to think about how to do it in a different way if need be, but it's also a show/production concept that, in some fundamental ways, would not work that way. Because of how the fall show was going to work, we were already planning on taking the summer off or doing something lower-key (barring the brief window of time when we thought we'd just be remounting *Lucky Chance* in the summer), so I'm just keeping an eye on how people are thinking it's looking for the fall and next spring, and hoping that by the time we'd need to pull the trigger on starting auditions and rehearsals, we'll know a little more.

KB: Your work is primarily produced at 95 Empire Street, which is a part of AS220. How much contact have you had with AS220 about moving forward? Were they a large part of how you proceeded with cancelling your last production?

RM: AS220 is dealing with a lot. I'm in touch periodically but they, somewhat understandably, are not currently able to tell us when we'd be able to use the space again. For better or for worse, the decision to cancel *The Lucky Chance* was also not in my hands.

KB: I asked Chris this, but I'm going to ask you as well: Can your theater — or any theater for that matter — survive being away for the longest predicted amount of time? Can any of us afford to be closed for 18 months? I don't just mean financially, but in terms of the cultural impact of being absent from people's lives for that long?

RM: I think people will want theater back. It'll be a little shaky because there won't be a moment where one day everyone is staying home and then you flip a switch and boom, the next day everyone feels safe being in a crowd again. But on principle, yes, I don't think that any amount of broadcasts, from the best theaters in the world, like we're getting now, are giving people the same experience as you get in a shared space. And that's not even getting into the actor side of it. In terms of Head Trick specifically, I hope people remember that we, specifically, exist when they can audition for and attend live theater again. Financially we'll be all right.

KB: Another repeat question that I think bears asking: If theater enters an on-and-off period where we have to shut down periodically due to the virus returning intermittently, what does that mean for how we put seasons and individual productions together?

RM: It's so hard. I love Chris' idea for rehearsing public domain and original work remotely, ready to go on two weeks' notice, but as he alluded to, it also feels like a lot to ask of people, to keep rehearsing (and memorizing?!) just in case something might happen. Maybe we'll be seeing more staged readings for a while. Also, I'm saying this off the top of my head now, but I wonder if the fact that this is exploding our ability to create coherent seasons within our own companies is an opportunity for us all as artistic directors to put our heads together about what we want to talk about as a theater community, if we're going to be in a state of one show per year for a couple of years. A non-festival festival. But yeah, the lead time involved in putting a production together is still a factor.

KB: How much time are you able to devote to thinking about all this while still taking care of your own mental health? Are you still attempting to plan even without a lot of information available to you?

RM: Constantly. The current state of affairs is really fucking with my ability to self-motivate (ask anyone in the *Lucky Chance* cast how long it took me to get out the notes from our last Zoom rehearsal), but my mental health would be tanking a lot harder if I weren't trying to keep doing things and connect with other theater people.

KB: Where do you stand on creating digital content? I know the liveness of theater is a huge part of your mission. Does that make you more hesitant to try moving toward more digital creation?

RM: You're right that liveness is a huge part of our mission at Head Trick, and that that's something that we have to either suspend for a bit or find other ways of thinking about. For me, personally, liveness is part of a broader interest in how medium and form can influence how we tell a story and what we get out of it, so I don't want to go in the direction of Zoom readings of plays whose stories are written to rely on characters being in the same room, where someone reads the stage directions in lieu of people physically doing them (at least not as an "official" production of the company, those readings

are fun to do as social things). Rather, I'd like to see us looking into stories where we can, you know, exploit the storytelling possibilities of the situation as it is. (A relevant comparison, for other people in nerd land, is the difference between playing a tabletop RPG where you describe how your character hits the monster with a sword, and playing an video chat "live-action" RPG where everyone is Star Wars fighter pilots on comms.) The project we've just announced is a first step toward that — we are attempting, in a fairly low-key but still auditioned/edited/rehearsed/etc. way, a web series of *Dangerous Liaisons*, because the novel as written (not the existing theater/film adaptation) is literally all told through letters from people in one place to people in another. But on the other hand, I was also just reading a news article about "drive-in" live dance performance, where people go to different locations to see solo and duet dances at a safe distance, and I want to think about whether that could work for theater, too.

KB: How can people help the theater right now? What are the donation links, and is there anything else they can do other than staying home and staying safe?

RM: Well, anything people can donate to Head Trick would be appreciated. You can donate through our Square store: squareup.com/store/headtrick

Other than that, audition for *Dangerous Liaisons*! Chat with us and with your fellow lonely theater people on our Facebook page (we share interesting links and fun questions — if you have an opinion on which character should remain a human in an all-Muppet version of your favorite play, please share your vision with the world)! For that matter, if you have a burning question for the world, drop us a line and maybe we'll post it. Send us videos of yourself doing theater at your webcam or at a safe distance outside that we can share! And keep an eye out for the Zoom *Lucky Chance*, announcements of our future projects and installments of *Dangerous Liaisons*.

**[The Pandemic Takes Center Stage:
Christopher Simpson discusses keeping
theater alive](#)**



Seth Jacobson Photography

Christopher Simpson; Photo Credit: Seth Jacobson

Those of us in the performing arts are finding ourselves facing a new reality. As a member of the theater community, I'm lucky enough to be able to speak with leaders of artistic organizations all over the state about how they're coping and what their plans are for the future, and I think it's important we start having those conversations in more open forums, which is why I'm grateful to my friend Christopher Simpson for agreeing to speak with me here in an interview for *Motif*.

Christopher is the artistic director of the Contemporary Theatre Company in Wakefield. He is also a reputable community leader in South County, and perhaps most important at the moment, he was the first artistic director in the state to recognize the threat of this virus and act accordingly. When this all started, even I was arguing that maybe we were overreacting a bit, and Christopher was the one with the forethought to begin cancelling programming that would put people at risk, and he deserves to be recognized for that.

I was excited to check in with him, and this is what he had to say:

Kevin Broccoli: First off, how are you doing right now? I know we check in regularly, but all of us are having good days and bad days. How have the days been recently?

Christopher Simpson: Oh man. Hard hitting questions, right off the bat. Some days are good. Some days are very bad. Most days have an unpredictable mix of totally okay and pretty awful. As a leader of a local cultural institution, I'm tempted to give you a cheerful answer and "put on a positive face" — but I think quality leadership includes a willingness to be vulnerable in public, when necessary. If people are struggling, I think that's a normal response to something as disruptive as this. I am struggling. But, honestly, this evening is a good one for me, so hey. Live in the moment and take the good with the bad, right?

KB: You were one of the first theaters to be cancelling programming when all this started. Why was that your immediate impulse when even I was a little hesitant to do the same?

CS: We cancelled our first show on March 12; a few other theaters ended up making the same call, but we didn't know that at the time. We knew we needed to take the crisis seriously, and we didn't want our negligence to be responsible for a group of transmissions. We also thought that our decision might influence others around us, and we didn't want to encourage any further delays within our community.

That was a scary day, for sure — we thought we might be alone in the decision to cancel. We'd already sold every ticket to that night's show, so we knew we'd a) have a high risk of transmission if we brought people in, and b) be making a really bold stand by canceling.

There were two documents — a really thoughtful email from my west coast colleague Max Mathews, and a really assertive *Medium* article by Tomas Pueyo — that strongly nudged us toward the proactive call. Even so, it was a difficult moment.

KB: What's the community response been like to the theater being closed? Are you seeing an outpouring of support?

CS: We've heard from tons of our fans and friends, all sharing love. We've also had a lot of folks send unsolicited donations or make offers of help. At the CTC, we've always focused on the community of people around our theater. In some ways, it's the thing that excites us the most about our work — how we weave ongoing relationships with the people who frequent our space, and create a true community of people who know and care for each other. And to feel that hundreds of friends and neighbors are here for us when we need them — it's a sign that our work has a life of its own. It's a very rewarding thing.

KB: Everyone is playing a guessing game about when it'll be safe to go back into theaters again. Do you fall on the hopeful side of that or are you thinking it'll be closer to 2021 before we can resume theatrical programming?

CS: I *hope* that we'll be able to put on shows over the summer, albeit with limited audience sizes. At the CTC we have an outdoor stage on our beautiful riverfront patio, and I'm hopeful that we'll be able to use it to the fullest extent this summer, to produce work and bring people together in the most positive ways we safely can. But given the costs of producing shows and the necessity of full houses to make it all work, I'd be very surprised if any theater was truly up and running in anything resembling a normal sense before the end of the year. We're all hoping for a cure or a mutation or a vaccine to provide an easy fix, but until then...

KB: I've been saying that for me, there's a logical progression of making decisions based on information and right now, we just don't have the information we need to make those decisions. How has this affected you as a leader in charge of trying to make plans for the future?

CS: It feels impossible to truly plan anything right now. We're all soaking in ideas, possible fixes, hopeful concepts — but there's just no way to know what's coming. The CTC has cultivated a great

ensemble of actors, musicians, improvisors, designers, directors and more. I have faith that our team will be able to get outstanding work back up on our stage once we have some direction. But for now... boy, it's really hard to be sitting here feeling so useless every day.

KB: Can your theater — or any theater for that matter — survive being away for the longest predicted amount of time? Can any of us afford to be closed for 18 months? I don't just mean financially, but in terms of the cultural impact of being absent from people's lives for that long?

CS: Financially, we can do it as long as we maintain enough income to cover the basic necessities of our mortgage, insurance and utilities. For us, that's about 10% of our normal operating budget. With no programs at all and our staff entirely laid off, we can survive for as long as our reserves hold out and our community remains willing to help us weather the storm.

Culturally, I don't know what 18 months does to a theater. Actors may have moved on, students will be out of practice, audience needs will have changed, and the logistics will be totally unprecedented. Directors, actors and designers may suddenly feel unfamiliar in their jobs, rusty and out of sorts. That being said, the inspiration will be high and excitement will be magnificent. It's going to be a once-in-a-lifetime rediscovery of what we love — and that's something to look forward to!

Everyone is going to be very, very hungry for immediacy, spontaneity and the genuine delight of watching other people respond in real time to challenging situations. That's why live theater has never disappeared, and probably never will. There will be a demand, and those who survive the shutdown will have an audience, and probably a lot of latitude to struggle as they get back on their feet, as long as they prioritize the value of sharing with their audience — not just presenting work *at* them.

KB: If theater enters an on-and-off period where we have to shut down periodically due to the virus returning intermittently, what does that mean for how we put seasons and individual productions together?

CS: I have no idea what that is going to be like for anyone. At the CTC, we'll hopefully be able to put up improvised theater on relatively short notice, and over the years of practicing the form, we've become quite good at them. That will be a bit of a superpower for us, because they are so incredibly flexible in terms of cast, content and style. Furthermore, our musician community will help us get really great experiences up in a hurry.

We'll also need to be creative in terms of utilizing downtime to digitally rehearse public domain and original works — things where the cost of producing the show is lower so there is less risk. In that

hypothetical scenario, if people can be learning shows during a closure and are ready to get it up on its feet really fast, we might be able to see some productions within windows of openness. But it's hard to imagine getting actors excited for that level of uncertainty, let alone how we'd advertise that kind of schedule... Yeah, there's a lot to consider here.

KB: How much time a day, if any, right now are you able to donate to thinking about all this before it becomes overwhelming? Do you think it's smarter to wait until we hear more from the local government before we even attempt making plans?

CS: Oh, god. Some days I can think about it for about an hour or two. Other times I can't bear to spend even a moment on it. It varies widely. It helps to have brilliant friends, coworkers, board members and colleagues — like you, Kevin — who I can talk to and bounce ideas off. We're in totally uncharted territory — we have a lot we'll need to sound out together before we move forward. I'm totally here to talk to any theater people who want to chat about the future. I don't have many answers, but I'm excited to try.

KB: How can people help the theater right now? What are the donation links, and is there anything else they can do other than staying home and staying safe?

CS: Donations are certainly a big deal right now; we don't know how many months it'll be without normal programs, and like I said ... as long as we can make that mortgage, we'll be okay ... so please help us keep that fund strong, if you can. Anyone can contribute at contemporarytheatercompany.com/donate

Otherwise, please visit our Facebook page — different ensemble members share songs, monologues and other art over there every day or two. Kevin and I are also making artistic director videos under the moniker of "Quick Questions with Kevin and Chris" where we discuss theatrical concepts and ideas, just to keep our minds sharp. People are really enjoying them, so please check those out and maybe post some responses, to help keep the dialogue alive and the inspiration rolling!

[Therapeutic Theater: COAST tackles](#)

addiction from the stage



As an educator, I can tell you a plethora of things about education today; cell phones are a battle, students still cheer when Bob Ewell meets his end, and nacho day is the best day in the cafeteria. Kids groan when you excitedly announce that they're going to study Shakespeare, but after watching a production of *Macbeth* they're hooked.

As an English teacher I'm fortunate that my content calls upon the theater from time to time, and I've witnessed its power in my classroom. So when I heard that the nonprofit organization COAAST was tackling addiction through original plays, I was intrigued. COAAST, which stands for Creating outreach About Addiction Support Together, was founded by Ana Bess Moyer Bell, a drama therapist who also runs her own private practice in Southern RI. As the executive director and playwright for COAAST, Moyer Bell's two shows *Four Legs to Stand on Act 1* and *Four Legs to Stand On Act II* tour to between 10 and 15 schools per year. And although most shows are done in Rhode Island, they have traveled to Massachusetts, New Jersey and Washington DC.

When COAAST comes to a school, it's not the assemblies my generation sat through where students are checked out while they're being spoken to. Theater isn't something you accept passively, but something you're engaged with as an audience member. By bringing a production — a story — kids are automatically engaged. Humans thrive on storytelling; a story or play by its nature draws you in.

Instead of a "free period" for students, COAAST brings a healing period through the world of drama. Students are then invited to share their thoughts and experiences in a talk back session.

"The talk back is important," Moyer Bell explains. "It's therapeutic. Giving them a space to tell their own story is important, it's integral." Having a space to talk about anything that weighs on your mind, especially something as serious and traumatic as addiction, is vital for the healing process. Even being a professional in the field, Moyer Bell has found that things surprise her when touring the schools.

"My biggest surprise is how many kids in schools have addiction {in their lives} or their brothers, their uncles have died." By bringing COAAST into a school, school communities are normalizing the conversation around addiction. In my opinion, the most natural way to change the conversation in society, and normalize a the topic, is to begin with our youth. In my teaching, I am amazed by this generation and the topics they will bring up and discuss in a classroom where they feel safe. COAAST is doing this with a wider audience. And like in a classroom where a teacher has cultivated a sense of safety, COAAST has put this feeling of safety together in an authentic manner. As the saying goes, *write what you know*, all plays are taken from real life. From the writing to the performers, "All the actors have a connection to addiction. They share their stories, it makes them credible." This authenticity and credibility help open the doors to these important discussions. Having performers who are knowledgeable when it comes to addiction makes their character all the more real to the students. "Kids connect with a character, they'll go to that actor and tell that story," Moyer Bell explained.

I interviewed Moyer Bell pre-long distance learning and hoped to experience a show in order to complete this story. Now after three weeks home and away from my students, I can see the need for COAAST's programming now more than ever. One of the things we have either witnessed as teachers, or parents acting as teachers, or even as anyone who follows the news, school might be continuing, but all invested parties miss the face-to-face interaction. The fact that Rhode Islanders have this program right here in our backyard is not only an immensely wonderful thing, but will become increasingly more vital once schools are allowed to operate in-person classes.

The day Governor Raimondo announced that schools would be closed for two weeks, COAAST announced that all in-person rehearsals, performances and drama therapy groups were suspended. "All staff, interns, board members and volunteers have been asked to work remotely during this period. All meetings and drama therapy groups are being held virtually." In these new times it's vitally important that we make programs work within the confines of social distancing, and COAAST, like so many of us, has a plan and is still doing this vital work.

For more information about COAAST's virtual plan, or to book a show or workshop please email COAAST's office manager Jay Are at officemanager@coaast.org

For clinical support, or any other question, please contact executive director Ana Bess at annabess@coaast.org. Their website (coaast.org) has information regarding their programs and their yearly Gala, which helps fund these necessary programs.

[Randy Andy Presents: Bushfires & Earthquakes](#)

On Saturday, February 29, Askew in Providence was alive with cheering, singing and dancing during a fundraiser held by drag king extraordinaire Randy Andy. The event, aptly named *Bushfires & Earthquakes*, was in support of relief for Australia and Puerto Rico, regions recently affected by natural disasters. The venue found itself packed wall to wall with long-time supporters, occasional visitors and even some newbies.

Randy Andy performed to the song "Land Down Under" by Men at Work. The performance allowed him and his fellow performers to engage with the audience, which not only drove the crowd wild, but helped raise money for the cause in the form of ones (if you know what I mean). Among the performers who donated their time to the fundraiser were Randy Andy, Dick Dandy, Sergeant George, Wade Waterman, Man Lee, Hans In'Zeir and the talented Bobby Fre\$h who finished up the night with some moonwalking to the song "Billy Jean" by Michael Jackson. There was no shortage of laughter, excitement, music and dancing, which left the audience in constant applause.

Andy offers several King Maker workshops throughout the year, which assists aspiring kings with drag performance. The workshops, where kings like Bobby Fre\$h got their start, last five weeks and culminate in recitals where new kings get to show off their skills. Workshops like the King Maker series, the resulting recitals and drag in general are important for many reasons, according to Andy, because "the personas that we [drag kings] put up on stage allow us to access parts of ourselves that we might otherwise have difficulty accessing."

Andy started their own journey in drag after moving to Seattle, Washington, in 2000. Seattle already had a somewhat established drag king scene and connected with those interested in performing by leaving signup sheets for participation in their events around the city. It was this type of grassroots

movement that inspired Andy to step into the shoes of Randy Andy. Unforeseen conditions eventually forced Andy to move back to Rhode Island. Though Andy left many things behind, they did not forget to bring their passion for drag. Andy took their knowledge acquired in Seattle and began using it to cultivate a drag king scene in Rhode Island. In 2018, their first drag king show, *RI Jollies*, sold-out to a welcoming audience.

Within the LGBTQ+ community, drag kings do not receive the same attention and recognition as drag queens. Eventually, Andy hopes to see more equity in areas like payment and opportunities to perform. Andy's goal has been to create a safe space for the queer community. They do this by not only screening physical locations in which events are held, but by also making sure that the people allowed into the community are respectful and supportive. Even at the fundraiser, Andy was diligent in setting down rules with the audience regarding personal space, consent and physical contact with performers.

The fundraiser was a huge success, raising \$2,030 from ticket sales, performances and a raffle of goods and services generously donated by local businesses. As the coronavirus unfolds, Randy Andy is looking to reshape his productions in a way that will support the artists, venues and industries that have been hit particularly hard.

To learn more about Randy Andy, visit PVDdrag.com or find Randy Andy on Facebook.



Artistic Expression: This pandemic is hitting artists where it hurts

Performance cancellations, while necessary, are having a very real impact on the income of local artists. On this page, we'll compile a list of resources and fun stuff to help artists connect, support each other and express themselves. To add to this list, email news@motifri.com

Find a list of free resources, opportunities and financial relief opportunities for artists here: covid19freelanceartistresource.wordpress.com/?fbclid=IwAR2FhLt924rScJt2Hl4vMyIXNFEDWyamcDhBmPjsWsYIJZ7mbHreC87j370

Rad Cat Crimson Al-Khemia insists that “the quarantine can’t stop the scene” and encourages artists to keep expressing themselves by posting videos of their performances with #TheRadRemedy.

Head Trick Theatre will help you take part in #TheRadRemedy. Email your idea of a theater performance or scene you’d like to perform and record to headtricktheatre@gmail.com.

Spoken word artist Christopher Johnson also suggests artists post videos of their performances with #SocialDistance.

Does Dog Exist?: Two sisters, a governess and a canine suffering an existential crisis take the stage in The Moors



Vanessa Paige and Alexis Ingram in *The Moors*; photo credit: Dave Cantelli

Epic Theatre Company's artistic director Kevin Broccoli is ecstatic to have brought Jen Silverman's *The Moors* to Theatre 82 in a dark and alluring production directed by Vince Petronio (Wolf Hall) and featuring some Epic favorites on the stage. "Jen Silverman has one of my favorite minds in the theater," says Broccoli. "When I read *The Moors*, it was like nothing I had ever encountered, with so many brilliant references to the style it borrows from, while reinventing it along the way. It also offers a treasure trove of great characters and enough surprises to shock even the savviest of theater audiences."

The Moors is hailed as a fantastical riff on a world similar to one found in a Brontë novel, but with a modern and surreal twist. "It centers around two sisters and their dog who introduce a new governess into their stately home, only to have her presence disrupt their lives in ways they never could have imagined," explains Broccoli. "Meanwhile, a tragic encounter with a moorhen has their dog asking big questions of his own. This wild and wonderful story from one of America's hottest young playwrights is a blast of fresh air straight from the sharpest of imaginations."

It does keep you on your toes. How often do you get to see talented actors portray intense animals? One has to wonder what it's like to get into that headspace. Katie Westgate flies in as the moorhen, keenly aware of the risks involved in befriending a mastiff, portrayed by Rico Lanni. By all accounts from his humans, the dog "will rip your face off!" We actually feel sorry for the mastiff, as he lies by the humans' feet so sad and seemingly misjudged. However, the two form an unlikely bond, which is fun to watch as Westgate questioningly antagonizes Lanni. The moorhen is apprehensive, but much like any dog you've ever met, Lanni persists in his efforts to be liked and eventually wins the girl, so to speak.

Director of production management Samantha Gaus says, "I love a play centered around strong female characters, but more than that I love a show with animals. Particularly a dog having an existential crisis. Having Katie Westgate as our hen has been particularly amazing because she is so talented and such a joy to watch." She adds, "Kevin has such a talent for choosing brilliant and outside-of-the-box shows."

The gothic-era drama includes period furnishings (stage manager Emma Locke) and garb (by Jen Stavrakas), with the exception of the animals. What do these creatures wear, you might ask? Trench coats, of course! Basic lighting design (Kevin Thibault) illuminates the hay blocks that the animals chat on, as well as the salon/den, which the seemingly confused sisters whimsically refer to as other rooms in the home, such as the new governess' bedroom. It's not hard to follow the dysfunction, though. Marjory, portrayed by Vanessa Paige, expertly gives us little clues to indicate when she is the house maid with typhus (cough cough); Mallory, the scullery maid with child; or the author, Margaret. Turns out she's quite good at manipulating in general. We're also taken in by Emilie's (Alexis Ingram) decorous mannerisms. Her character development is, shall we say, winning. (Sorry, there'll be no intentional

spoilers here!)

The sisters, Huldey (Kerry Giorgi) and Agatha (Stephanie Traversa) have secrets of their own. It's like watching a tennis match when they talk with Emilie, your head volleying back and forth to see what each will say next, since nothing is quite as it seems. Emilie isn't as addled as you might think, however. You'll love the twists and turns as the action builds to the stunning resolution.

In keeping with this season's theme at Epic Theatre - the power of truth - this ardently disturbing production seems largely fitting. "Vince Petronio is back in the director's seat for us," says Broccoli, "and he's crafted a production that we think is going to be the perfect midway point as we head into the latter half of our eighth season, and it's our first time using the (slightly) larger space located at Theatre 82 since last June. It's still intimate and inviting, but it allows us to tell the story with a few extra bells and whistles." Just keep in mind - particularly in this case - some bells cannot be unrung!

Jen Silverman's The Moors, directed by Vince Petronio, runs at Theatre 82, 82 Rolfe Sq, Cranston, through Mar 21. For tickets, go to epictheatreri.org Epic Theatre stated the following regarding COVID-19 on March 12:

"Here at Epic, we're closely monitoring the current health situation, and we are in contact with local and state government about best practices. At the moment, we have not been instructed to cancel programming, and we're under the capacity limits as detailed in the state guidelines."