

# Reflection Not Reaction: A conversation with Rita Maron from The Academy Players



Rita Maron; Photo Credit: Dual Edge Photography

*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 that we start having those conversations in more open forums, which is why I'm grateful my friend Rita Maron was able to speak with me this week.*

*Rita is the Artistic Director of the Academy Players in Providence, Rhode Island.*

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

**Rita Maron:** Numb, trying really hard to stay positive and focus on our other aspects of theater, our building, and improvements and constant contact with a large majority of our Academy family.

**KB:** Academy was about to open *Tuck Everlasting* when all this began. I've started most of these interviews by asking artistic directors if they plan to return to whatever programming was disrupted as the result of the pandemic. Do you plan on revisiting "Tuck," and were any of the other projects that you had planned on producing titles you'd like to see when the time comes to reopen?

**RM:** We are constantly monitoring the ever-changing guidelines with COVID-19, and have tentatively scheduled *Tuck Everlasting*, which was going to be a fundraiser for Heavenly Gingers, as our first show after we reopen. Heavenly Gingers was created by our friends Frank O'Donnell and John Morris. Heavenly Gingers honors the lives and passions of two fiery redheads and helps Keep Passion for Performance Alive in young people. This foundation is extremely important to Academy Players we were all so saddened when we had to stop the production. Prior to COVID, we had secured the rights to six other musicals and as soon as we are clear to do so, we plan on doing our whole season in 2021, along with some amazing surprises.

**KB:** Education is a huge component of the work you do at Academy. What are you hearing from parents right now? Are they eager to return with their children and families to the theater or is there apprehension to do so?

**RM:** We hear daily from our family of parents, friends and siblings about their want and need to return to Academy. The families want a sense of normalcy, and from what I hear constantly, from phone calls, texts, messages, emails and social media posts, they want to return. I honestly think that many of our families who fall in this category know that we would always have their safety and health as our number one priority. Over the years we have earned that trust and everyone is treated like family so everyone is ready to return home to the family. I miss everyone so much.

**KB:** I said to one of the artists I interviewed for Epic that while I could see some ways around producing plays even with social distancing guidelines, I'm not sure how I would undertake a musical with those protocols in place. Do they seem as prohibitive to you as they do to me? As a director and choreographer of big cast shows, can you envision creating that kind of work under these guidelines?

**RM:** Yes, I do think the protocols in place are prohibitive. Based upon the current guidelines, I do not believe we can responsibly put on a full-scale musical that for me would ensure the safety of our cast, musicians, crew and faithful audience members. With that being said, we have had meetings with our team reaching out to the younger directors and choreographers, allowing them to design a blueprint of virtual rehearsals and performances remotely for now. Dance and choreography is such a huge extension of a musical. It continues to tell the story where the libretto ends. I don't know how you would complete the story without being able to achieve dancing and close contact.

**KB:** Fiscally speaking, producing musicals seems to get more and more expensive. Right now the question everyone is asking is whether or not they can reopen, limit capacity and still be financially viable. Does that seem possible to you?

**RM:** Given the math, no, it does not seem possible. We have under 200 seats, and based upon the social distancing guidelines, we have calculated that only 25% of our seating could be utilized. When you then calculate the cost of the rights to a musical, the cost of a live band, costumes and props, it doesn't add up. When you calculate that math and only being allowed 40 to 50 people in the audience, any musical we would perform would generate a loss at the end of the run. This goes against our model where we normally fill our house at each performance.

**KB:** How are you feeling as an artist about stepping into a space again? As we start to see people adjusting to the idea of reopening, do you feel like it's something you'd be comfortable doing in the next few months or are you in the camp that feels we should wait until 2021 or maybe even beyond?

**RM:** I hate this question!! Personally, I will continue to listen to the experts and continue to reflect

before I react. At the present time I am not comfortable having my staff, cast and audiences come home to Academy. As time goes on, and as the experts find out more about this virus and how it impacts all of us, that might change. The biggest game-changer there is a vaccine or treatment that will make it safe for us to interact the way we used to. This pandemic has caused all theaters to reassess our health protocols and put those additional safeguards in place prior to opening. We are doing that during this dark period. We all will be better and stronger theaters. If something was to change and there was a miracle, my team and I are ready to open at any moment. Academy is extremely fortunate to have its own building and be able to have the flexibility of opening and closing at our own discretion. We hope when we do open, this will be the last time we close for something this difficult.

**KB:** Academy is one of the more impressive arts facilities in Rhode Island, and I know your family runs a construction company in addition to the theater. Your husband Tom is often a great voice to listen to when it comes to things like safety. I know you've shared with me that he's mentioned ideas about changing the physical aspects of a theater, not just Academy but theaters in general, to try and make them safer. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**RM:** The construction company had to make modifications to some of our safety protocols. These included constant cleaning of work areas, facemasks, social distancing, etc. The construction office was already set up in a way that allowed a safe work environment. With regard to the theater, there might have to be modifications to certain aspects of our theater, which would include designated entrances and exits to the theater. Tom feels it will be a "touchless" society when visiting the theaters and entertainment venues. More grants need to be available for theaters to implement physical changes to their venues to follow what might become the "new normal." Academy is extremely fortunate to have the Commercial Construction Company as our partner for many reasons, which include being kept up-to-date with the constant safety and health code regulation changes to ensure safety all the time, even prior to this virus. As we move forward in this unprecedented time, Academy is ready for any and all changes for reopening.

**KB:** My theater doesn't tend to have a lot of younger artists or audiences coming into it on a regular basis since usually the work we do is aimed at the college and above level. You've made welcoming audiences of all ages into your space as part of Academy's mission. Does having to consider a wide range of age groups — from children to their grandparents — present more of a challenge as you try to plan for the future?

**RM:** I simply do not know enough about this virus to just worry about one age demographic. I am always concerned how it affects our audiences and cast members from ages 5 to 105. We may design special performance times for our elderly population as the evidence suggests that this age group are, sadly, the most vulnerable to this virus. We are designing performance schedules that would accommodate all of our audiences, and casts that are high risk or have underlying medical conditions. These were important areas our board of directors and team were working on before we went dark. Once a show is ready for opening and we are in tech, I tell my cast all the time, "You have all the tools to deliver. My concern now is my audience, what they need to be comfortable and happy." If the audience tells me the music is too loud, the parking lot is too slippery, it is too cold in the building, I can't hear the vocals, etc, my whole team goes to work and to successfully make our audiences happy at home. This will continue to be the focus as we enter this "new normal." By the way, I hate the term "new normal." I'm going to change that to a "better normal." So this will be our focus as we enter a "better normal."

**KB:** What's your stance on digital programming? So far, everyone I've talked to has fallen on a different part of the spectrum. As a social media addict, I dove right in, but I still have a hard time getting used to long-form content, whereas other companies have decided it's not for them at all. I don't think there's a right or wrong answer here, but what's your feeling on it?

**RM:** I don't think there is a right or wrong answer. It's just not for me. In my opinion, the definition of community theater is interacting with our community on all sides of the stage. This is part of Academy's mission statement. Live theater is an essential part of our bond with our community and Academy family. Hugging the audience members that we know as they enter the theater is something that I love and to not be able to do that is heartbreaking to me. I love welcoming our community into the space. As I mentioned in a previous response, if our younger and talented staff request to do something digitally during this time, I'd say absolutely. Some of them have already begun doing that. I think it's important to remember that this will be our younger generation's reality now. Allowing them to explore, create and learn is again a huge part of our educational mission, which is always extremely important to me and my team.

**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:** We are extremely fortunate to have a business manager who always plans for the worst when designing budgets. Although, like every other theater, we are feeling the economic strain and would welcome any contribution and support, I hope that this pandemic would create even more respect for what we do to make people happy on all sides of the stage. I hope that while people are home staying safe that they look forward to more theater and entertainment and make it a goal to get up and see some of these great theaters we have in Rhode Island. Rhode Island has some amazingly talented people and I love showcasing them. They are moms, dads, lawyers, nurses, doctors, business leaders, and more who have a passion to perform and are so good at it. There are the theaters that many are used to attending, and I hope that Rhode Islanders break some of those habits and seek out all of us and make it a goal with their family to attend some of the smaller theaters, yours included Kevin, as well as Contemporary, Mixed Magic, Burbage, Bristol, Out Loud, there are so many amazing theaters that Rhode Island as a whole should know about and be proud of. It's such an artistic state filled with those who want to perform and tell their stories. So please remember to support all theaters in Rhode Island. We all want to survive this very difficult time together. You don't have to give to Academy, but hopefully, you will make it a goal to support arts and theater groups in Rhode Island any way you can.

My hope is that this crisis has done some good with allowing all of us to introduce ourselves to a new audience while learning and promoting our safety protocols. The state leaders that stand before us every day keeping us informed are the same people who love to go to live theater, to be entertained, and forget their stress for a couple of hours. As they exit the theater, that appreciation to continue and support and help should be following them right to the city, state and government floors to ensure we are heard and never ever forgotten. We are a small business, we are a vital part of our economic growth in Rhode Island, as well as a huge part of the entertainment. The relationship between the arts and the economy is one that positively affects people on all levels, especially when it comes to mental health. My younger cast are eager to get back to where they have a place to belong and my adult cast look forward to releasing their anxiety at rehearsal and performance.

As one of my best friends and Academy Board members has said, "This is our gym. This is our church." I am always so proud of my board of directors, members at large, our families, and all our volunteers,

who care so much for theater, our mission, and why we do what we do. This is my family and it is a family to so many.

Our link to help support Academy Players: [academyplayersri.org/donate.html](http://academyplayersri.org/donate.html)