

# Bringing Back Theater: How the independent theater community plans to keep you safe and entertained

*Station 11* is one of my favorite books. It's about a pandemic called the Georgia Flu that wipes out most of the world's population. It's probably not the best time to read it if you haven't already done so, but I do recommend it in the future when we're vaccinated and feeling safe (or safer, depending on your outlook). The book goes back and forth between the present and the future - 15 years later as society begins to rebuild - and features a storyline about a troupe of artists and musicians who travel around to the various encampments to perform Shakespeare and classical music. This storyline highlights the importance of the arts on society, our well-being and our connection to one another.

The arts have been inaccessible for the past few months, as theaters, museums and concert venues have been the last to open. As we enter Phase III of re-opening, many of us are cautious but excited about once again dining at our favorite restaurant, spending the day at the beach, even going to a movies, but what about our access to the arts, in particular, the theater? Where are they in the plan, and what are the guidelines for keeping us safe in such crowded spaces?

I spoke to Kevin Broccoli, the artistic director of Epic Theatre Company in Cranston (and *Motif* contributor). He is part of the newly formed Rhode Island Theater Coalition (RITC), a group of independent theater companies brought together to be a collective voice in Rhode Island's plans to re-open. The theaters part of the coalition, in addition to Epic Theatre Company, are the Academy Players, Burbage Theatre Company, The Contemporary Theatre Company, Head Trick Theatre, Mixed Magic Theatre, The Players at the Barker Playhouse and WomensWork Theatre Collaborative. The larger theaters, such as PPAC and Trinity, have been part of the conversation, but, as Kevin explained, the independent theaters had been completely left out. He realized that this oversight was not intentional, but rather due to a lack of awareness. "They seemed to have no idea we even existed." Hence the RITC was formed, with the main goal of becoming part of that conversation.

Now they have a seat at the table with regard to re-opening. The problem, however, is that guidance for theaters is virtually non-existent. Restaurants have clear guidance, but theaters have been told to follow the general guidelines for Phase III: public gatherings should be limited to 66% capacity with 6-foot spacing. What does that mean for an independent theater that may have a successful performance with an audience of 30? Is it safe? What about the actors, who must be in close proximity both on and behind the stage? With no clear guidelines, the theaters are left to make these critical decisions on their own.

One concern for the RITC is perception. Restaurants have been given a lot of air time and leeway, while theaters have been one of the last entities to get the green light to re-open. But is a restaurant really any safer than a theater? During a theater performance, it's quite easy to sit 6 feet apart wearing a mask. Not so while dining in a restaurant. As Kevin explained, "opening restaurants while theaters remain closed makes it seem like going to a theater is more dangerous than going to a restaurant. That could cause long-term damage to the arts." This provides further impetus for the RITC to get it right when it comes to reopening.

Fortunately, artists are creative, so unlike restaurants with limited options, the sky is the limit for independent theaters. The RITC is working collaboratively to channel that creative vision and come up with protocols and safeguards for theater-goers and cast alike. Kevin suggests the state can learn from the example the theater community will set. So many other facets of our lives are akin to a theater performance: church, college classrooms, even elementary schools. There is a performer and an audience. What works for one might work for all, so this is definitely something worthy of attention.

By forming a coalition, the RITC has solidified what had already been a relationship of respect and cooperation. Now they are sharing their knowledge, protocols and ideas, working as one entity toward one common goal: safely bringing the arts back to Rhode Islanders. Kevin shares the concern that many of us do: While life feels pretty good right now, the fall brings much uncertainty as fears of a larger, more deadly second wave loom. While we certainly hope that's not the case, Kevin reminds people that "hope is not a plan." Fortunately for all of us, Rhode Island's independent theater community has both hope and a plan.