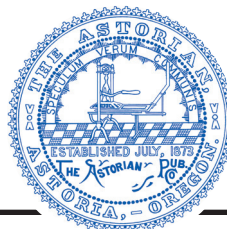


OPINION



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WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

When will the show go on?

Clatsop County's robust performing arts sector is rare in a rural county. Like restaurants and other consumer-driven enterprises, theaters have been dealt a big setback by the coronavirus shutdown.

In this conversation, three theater directors talk about how their organization is coping and what their reopening might look like. They are:



STEVE FORRESTER

- Jennifer Crockett, executive director of the Liberty Theatre.
- Patrick Lathrop, executive director of the Coaster Theatre.
- Michael Desmond, operations manager of the Astor Street Opry Company.

Q: At what moment in the life of your theater did you hear Gov. Kate Brown's shelter-in-place order?

Lathrop: We had just enjoyed a most wonderful final dress rehearsal of our show 'Play On.' The next day at 1 p.m. we decided to close the theater. The actors didn't get their opening night. It was devastating to them emotionally.

We closed for three weeks with plans to reopen. Then we decided to close the theater until reopening in June. That would coincide with our already published summer season.

Crockett: The day we heard the governor's mandate was my birthday and it was one month before the Liberty Theatre's birthday. We were in the thick of planning the theater's birthday. We were planning a big vaudeville night with 13 local performing arts organizations and bands. We were selling old-time radio spots for 90-year-old businesses in town. We had been working on that for over a year.

We also were planning silent films, as well as an old-fashioned cake and party on the stage.

And we were working with (Russian cellist) Sergey Antonov to premiere Astoria's first chamber music competition. And we were halfway through phase one construction for the stage house project.

We had sort of known it was coming. I'd been watching the governor closely and the League of Historic American Theatres had been talking about it. It was a heartbreaking decision, but easy. Rather than limp along, we decided to go dark.

Desmond: We were in the middle of preparing the 'Real Lewis and Clark Story,' rehearsing, selling tickets, getting sponsors. At the first wind we got of this we decided to limit the size of the audience. Then the state shut it down. So we canceled the show.

Q: How is your theater coping? Have you taken remedial measures? Are you seeking federal money?

Desmond: Yes to all three. We're doing pretty good. Last December, we received \$20,000 from the Oregon Community Foundation for capacity building. Now the foundation has said that anybody who got a grant can use it to pay for the challenges of COVID.

We also refinanced the mortgage on the playhouse. Now we have a 15-year fixed rate, instead of a balloon payment due in seven years. That also allowed us to save one month of mortgage payment.

Nobody is in the building. It was pretty clean already. It's frozen in time. I go in to check the mail once a week.

We got \$1,000 from the federal PPP (Paycheck Protection Program). It just showed up. We only use independent contractors. We gave that money to the people who need it the most. We just applied to the Oregon Community Foundation for a \$25,000 grant to cover the revenue from the two shows we won't be doing.

Crockett: We have applied for all the available emergency loans and foundational grants. We've not received any to date. The Liberty is fortunate that we've had so many donors give time and money during this closure.

We have furloughed the staff and cut expenses where can. We've kept the blade sign on.

Lathrop: We're involved with several of those right now. They are not particularly simple. The online applications don't always go smoothly. I'm working on three of them. Two are complete. I just got word of others out there. One is a National Endowment for the Arts program. U.S. Bank has been helpful.

Crockett: It is important to do anything we can to stay relevant. We're rolling out a virtual cinema. Theater patrons can buy tickets and watch a selection of five movies: two foreign films, a love story, a horror movie.

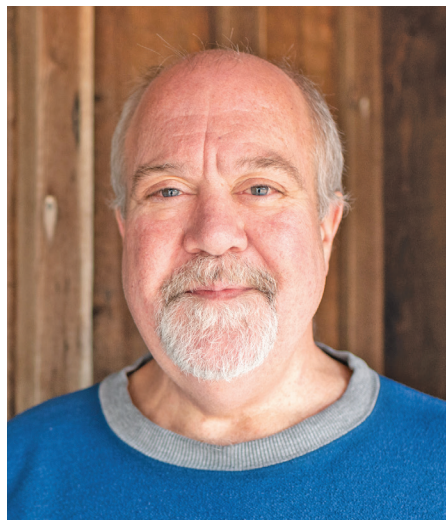
We are working with KMUN and Fort George to film local musicians at the



The Liberty Theatre is closed due to coronavirus concerns.
Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian



Jennifer Crockett is the executive director of the Liberty Theatre.



Patrick Lathrop is the executive director of the Coaster Theatre.



Michael Desmond is the operations manager of the Astor Street Opry Company.

Rope Room recording studio in the old YMCA building. We will stream that on the Liberty website.

We want to be positioned to reopen. There are a lot of theaters across the U.S. not planning on reopening in 2020.

Lathrop: We canceled four productions: 'Play On,' which was ready to go. 'Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks,' which was to open in May. We had to cancel our two summer shows: 'Spamalot' and 'Guilty Conscience.'

We hope we can bring back 'Spamalot' next summer. We'd done some costumes. Our board has been meeting regularly, setting goals to reopen to do all the planning. We've had two or three teleconferences. We're continuing to communicate with our public.

Q: What is your reopening strategy?

Lathrop: Our goal is to open 'Play On' and then the next week, open 'Bench in the Sun.' We will run them on alternating weeks through the summer.

Some of our patrons will have seen

'Bench in the Sun,' but most patrons in our summer audience are new. Then we hope to be back up and offer auditions for our fall show, 'Sleuth,' and our Christmas show, which is going to be 'Cinderella.'

Crockett: I've written budgets for three scenarios. I have borrowed the language from the Murdock Charitable Trust, which presents three options: blizzard, winter and Ice Age. The blizzard blows over quickly, and we return to business. But I don't see that as a viable budget right now. Winter is a long, slow recovery, but back to business as usual over a year. Ice Age is when we need to rethink our business models and the theater is dark for almost a year.

I think winter is the most likely outcome. As a small organization, we are situated for that. Our theater is a gathering place for the community. We're seeing ourselves as a resource for all performing arts organizations — assisting with the recovery effort, even including finding funding for others.

The Liberty has enormous resources

and a network to larger national organizations that a lot of our smaller performing groups here can't afford to join. We want to help these smaller groups survive.

It's important that performing arts don't get lost in the shuffle.

Desmond: We don't have one yet. We don't have any idea when this will happen. We can't advertise for auditions. We've talked about doing a little bit of the Lewis and Clark show and then 'Shanghaied in Astoria.' Also, we don't have any idea of whether and how many people will come to see the show.

We're hoping to open up. We can shrink the size of the seating for the audience. At least we have this grant, so we can pay our mortgage through the summer.

We don't have immediate pressing needs. We don't have employees. We don't have to pay for the rights to perform our plays.

Steve Forrester, the former editor and publisher of The Astorian, is the president and CEO of EO Media Group.