

THEATER *from page 1A*

the Friends of the FEC, Poisson Pen Players and others.

According to LRP Vice President Jim Wellington, "Florence loves its theater community, and has embraced an ever-expanding variety of entertainment styles. We have mapped out a number of strategies to ensure that when our audience is ready, we will be ready."

'Large gatherings is what we do'

The FEC's 21,000 square foot facility was founded in 1996 to be a local center for performing arts, gallery shows, conferences, meetings, dances and whatever else a thriving coastal community could think to plan.

Currently, its 455-seat theater, complete with orchestra pit, sits empty.

"There was 'Always Something Happening' at the FEC," said Rhodes, quoting the motto of the FEC. "Now there is not."

He is currently the only events center staff member still working, as City of Florence furloughed the remaining staff.

"We're the only non-essential city department," he added. "Large gatherings is what we primarily do, so it is hard."

Rhodes is working from home, helping the city come up with plans for the eventual further reopening of western Lane County and the coast.

"We will do what's mandated by the governor and the Centers for Disease Control, but we will probably err on the side of caution and be slow to opening," he said. "Like right now, we're closed. We're not going to be doing meetings, even though it's up to 25 people who can gather. We're remaining closed."

Meanwhile, the City of Florence is working toward reopening, working with department heads to follow the strict guidelines in place for Phase One and planning for Phase Two.

"We're a team, so we're sharing all the information," Rhodes said. "It's a little slower, just making sure that everything is covered as far as disinfecting, staying safe, social distancing and getting

shields in place. Everything that's coming down from the state is all shared throughout the departments of the city."

Even as some departments reopen and prepare to work with the public, the FEC stands alone.

"It's yet to be seen, even in Phase 2, if we're going to open up," Rhodes said. "Almost all of our events have been canceled for the entire month of June."

The FEC website, eventcenter.org, only features one event on its homepage: a magic show planned for September.

"Some of our later events are also rescheduling, since we really just don't know what it's going to look like with social distancing for large gatherings," Rhodes said. "We're going to have a lag as far as rebuilding events."

When Oregon began preparations for the COVID-19 pandemic in early March, the FEC implemented a rigorous disinfecting regimen. The FEC put its staff to work, including its more than a dozen part-time workers, and had a plan in place.

"We had hired about 15-20 part-time employees to be ready for the Rotary Auction later in March," Rhodes said. "We had revamped the kitchen and prepped everything, upgraded equipment, hired staffing, had everything in place, got uniforms — and then it all shut down. That was unfortunate."

He said there are liabilities ahead for food and beverage staff, "so we want to err on the side of caution with that. ... But we're ready to go when start back up."

As an events center, the FEC houses dozens of events each month and builds its annual calendar around big events on the main stage. These include spring and fall shows for LRP, many of Florence's festival events, a musical with 40+ cast members each spring for CROW and December's Holly Jolly Follies. All shows planned for April on have been canceled or postponed.

"Entertainment is going to be different. It's going to be the new normal," Rhodes said.

He talked about several options the center is considering, but won't have answers

until the future phases of re-opening more clearly spell out instructions. This could include limiting the number of tickets sold, emphasizing the flexible flat-floor space for events and even adding a livestream component.

"We're looking at options of doing performances in addition to livestreaming. People would have the choice to see the performance live, or pay

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— FEC Director Kevin Rhodes

for a ticket to see the livestream of it so they can stay at home if they're at a higher risk," Rhodes said.

Some of the FEC has already "gone digital" as the FEC Gallery Committee organized a virtual "2020 Fresh Impressions Exhibition" at www.eventcenter.org/general/page/virtual-tour-fresh-impressions-2020.

"Right now, our art gallery and art committee is doing this as a virtual art display. They're keeping the arts going, but not in a physical sense," Rhodes said.

It's an adaptation he is seeing each week as he plays music for his church, which is using the Zoom teleconference app to stream services each Sunday.

"I'm still playing every week, it's just through my office instead of in front of a couple hundred people," Rhodes said. "It has its challenges ... but we're still able to do it."

He added that he has plans in place to purchase quality streaming technology for the FEC if it comes to it.

"Across the nation, we're all thinking outside the box on how to continue the arts and still make it profitable. Right now, people are doing outdoor concerts or drive-in theater concerts, but for the most part, because of social distancing, they're doing it more to keep the arts going than to break even," Rhodes said. "The arts are never going to go away. It's just coming up with new and creative ways of continuing it, to where it can still be economically feasible."

And therein lies the challenge."

'Yes, And.' The importance of improv for the theater

In March, LRP was preparing for "Based On A True Story" (BOATS), a series of monologues told by community members. In April, it planned to hold auditions for "The Vagina Monologues,"

which it planned to premiere at the FEC in June.

Those were initially postponed, and then canceled.

As plans have continued to change, the large-scale musical planned for November shifted down to a smaller 12-person ensemble piece and even further to a chamber musical. But even that may not be possible under COVID-19.

"We have made many contingency plans in order to be able to respond to the widest variety of scenarios," Wellington said. "This is an unprecedented challenge. We are up against a moving target that we cannot see. It is difficult to plan for a re-opening when you don't know when that will be, or what it will look like. ... Our actors, musicians, crew and audience must be convinced that they can proceed in complete comfort and safety."

He joined LRP founding member and current president Annie Schmidt in talking about LRP's plans for the year. They reminisced about past shows, past actors and past venues for theater and the arts in Florence. They also talked about their dream casts for future shows, or people they would love to hear in BOATS.

"The actors we have here are phenomenal. Some of the people we found just sort of came out of the woodwork," Schmidt said. "They just do really spectacularly."

LRP is the community's theater group. It performs a majority of its shows and events at the FEC each year, including last November's

"Mamma Mia!"

"Personally, I feel totally involved with the FEC," Schmidt said. "When we first got started, before we were the Last Resort Players, we were part of the Florence Festival of the Arts. It was theater and art. ... Our mission was to raise money for the building of the FEC. Then, when it was built, the FEC was our home."

Like with a majority of organizations, LRP members are working from home. Board and committees are meeting through teleconference and answering chain emails rather than meeting in person. While meeting logistics can be figured out while socially distant, it makes planning a show difficult.

"The realities of social distancing may make it impossible to produce a show on the main stage this year," Wellington acknowledged. "We are exploring options for the flat floor, if we can make cabaret seating compatible with social distancing."

He and other LRP board members are reviewing several scripts and looking at what a staged musical would look like. Could they use the stage, record it, and show to an online audience? Could they limit seating?

For Schmidt, "There has to be a critical mass. We need the feedback from a live audience."

Wellington agreed. "We have to roll with the punches and be flexible, but theater is person to person."

"That's what makes it different from the movies and TV," Schmidt said. "You just need to hear the laughter and the gasps and know you nailed it."

For the LRP board, the biggest unanswered question is, "Are our patrons comfortable and ready to return to the theater for a live evening of entertainment? And will the virus cooperate?"

"The whole theatrical experience for both the actors and the audience is going to be radically changed," Wellington said.

LRP is not anxious to rush into performing before the community is ready. In reality, theater at its root is about people.

"How many people are

ready to come back, and under what conditions?" Wellington asked.

While LRP does not have solid plans, it has begun planning for small shows, monologues and other ways to keep blocking wide for actors on stage.

"We are ready to go with two shows. We've got directors for them," Schmidt said. "Our shows are director driven. That passion is already there."

"Obviously, we do community theater because we love it," Wellington said. "We're ready to love it again as soon as it is ready to love us back. ... We might have to do the hard stuff, like try to do streaming. ... There's so much that we don't know, that nobody knows, but we're trying to do a lot of 'what ifs.' It's about as much as we can do."

He later said, "If you approach it right, it can be very exciting for the possibilities. But there's just so much darn unknown right now."

Performing is about response. For actors, not only do they respond to directions, lines and cues, they respond to the energy in a theater. Add in one of the core tenets of improv, "yes, and" — where an actor takes what they're given and respond to it — and every performance is a new and magical experience. The audience can't see the same show twice.

"Improv is best when you're working with people," Wellington said. "That is how we need to go into it, saying 'Yes, and.'"

"Or 'yes, but,'" Schmidt countered. "We take what we're given and deal with it. It's certainly going to be interesting to see what happens."

If LRP has any say, what happens will continue to be entertaining, uplifting, emotional and an experience — as all theater should be.

Editor's Note: Next week, Siuslaw News will look at theater and COVID-19 from the perspective of children's theater and arts group CROW. With programs ranging from summer camps to dance courses, this group is taking to social media to keep community theater and the arts active in Florence.



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