

Remarks for Governor's Re-Opening Task Force

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## **Landscape and Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak this afternoon. I do so while feeling the weight and responsibility of the arts sector in NH, as our world has been at a complete stand still since March. Arts organizations across the state are significantly hurting and many have made their case to the GOFERR legislators and stakeholder committees demonstrating their importance to community vitality and economic impact and their need for assistance to find their way to the other side of this pandemic. I urge you to make it a priority to review these documents as there is not time at this session to adequately express just how critical this sector is to life in NH.

I was asked to speak about concerns and recommendations for reopening performing arts organizations, but before I start to dig into this specific topic, I want to begin by stating that the entire arts sector's overarching concern in this entire process is the health and safety of our patrons, employees, volunteers, performers and the communities we serve.

I next want to direct your attention to a document prepared by the Executive Director of the NH State Council on the Arts, Ginnie Lupi, that I sent along with my talking points. It is a summary of concerns about reopening from the entire arts sector, including theatres and performing arts venues, museums and galleries, educational arts organizations, and festivals. The concerns of these subsectors are noted, but it ends with a list of questions that I will use as my beginning as they are central to the entire field.

1. When will it be safe to reopen and how will "safe" be defined, and by whom?
2. How does the decision to reopen get made and by whom? Federal, state, local government?
3. What restrictions will be placed on organizations as they reopen? (i.e. gathering size, PPE, etc.)
4. What concerns will audiences have?
5. What concerns will artists have?
6. Where can we turn for support and what kind of aid will be available during the transition?

These questions are central, but how they are answered and acted upon in each of the subsectors of arts organizations will be different and, from my perspective, all of them need to be part of creating a plan for reopening the arts in NH. We have one chance to get this right, and guidelines and timelines need to reflect the needs of every sector of the arts community.

Drilling down into one of these subsectors, my remarks will focus on the situation facing the four major historic nonprofit presenting theatres in the state: The Capitol Center for the Arts in Concord, The Colonial Theatre in Keene, The Music Hall in Portsmouth and Lebanon Opera

House. Presenting theatres such as these feature national touring artists and productions in multiple art genres (dance, music, theatre, and comedy) most often for a single performance. Each of these performing arts centers have large theatres ranging from 800-1300 seats and some have second smaller venues for presenting local and regional artists in more intimate settings. Occupancy of the smaller venues ranges from 100-424.

Producing theatres, on the other hand, are organizations that mount their own productions that typically run for multiple days or weeks. There are hybrid presenting and producing theatres as well as genre-specific organizations that create and present their own work in their own venue or rent theatres such as those listed above. Though many of the needs and concerns of the presenting theatres will be similar to producing theatres, there are key differences in their operations, so I ask you to please not assume the remarks made here today apply across the board to all theatres.

### **The Subsector of Historic Presenting Theatres**

It seems fair to say that live performing arts events in NH's historic presenting theatres are antithetical to how we are being asked to live our lives in the era of the coronavirus. The missions and business models of presenting theatres such as the Capitol Center for the Arts are centered on welcoming a large number of people into rehabilitated classic theatres to engage with artists in real time and space. We want people to lean in and let a performance wash over and through them. For a typical show in the CCA's large Chubb Theatre, 800-1250 people sit elbow to elbow with fellow humans, and in our new 424 flexible standing venue, the Bank of NH Stage, audiences are in constant motion often gathered as tightly as possible to the front of the stage. Food, beverage, and merchandise sales are not only part of the experience, but also provide critical income streams in addition to ticket sales for both venues.

Under substantial financial strain from being forced to close for 2-plus months, the CCA along with our sister performing arts theatres all want to wave our magic wands and throw open our doors to welcome people back into our theatres at full occupancy rates. However, we know this is not possible until the coronavirus has been tamed and there is a vaccine and medical treatments to keep it in check. In the meantime, the central question looming large in our lives is, can we realistically reopen our theatres while addressing health, hygiene, and social distancing guidelines in a way that is financially viable?

Unfortunately, the contagious nature of the coronavirus, the layout and design of NH's historic theatres, the business model of presenting theatres, and the need for people to feel safe while attending a show are at odds with each other and make reopening very complicated.

The CCA has reviewed the Universal Guidelines 2.0 and believes it will be able to comply with meeting the expectations as an employer for our employees. However, opening our stage doors to tours that are crisscrossing the country and our front doors to the public is another matter.

Here is the current reality for NH Historic Presenting Theatres:

1. All spring shows in March, April, and May were cancelled or rescheduled into FY20-21 (for CCA, Aug-July). These disruptions caused significant show revenue losses (\$500-\$700K) and no new revenue is expected until next season's shows are announced, placed on sale, and marketing efforts commence. Theatres are reluctant to do this until it is certain that they will be open in the fall and tours are formally confirmed.
2. Presenters have separate deals and contracts with artist agencies for each show and are presently sitting with a mix of new season shows and rescheduled shows (for CCA, 34 new season and 19 rescheduled). Contracts for rescheduled shows are particularly problematic as they were negotiated pre-coronavirus and built on the assumption of full venue capacity, when audience trust was intact. Presenters are hamstrung to renegotiate not knowing if occupancy restrictions will apply. In addition, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence indicating patrons are not ready to buy tickets making it difficult to set a realistic sales target goal.
3. Each show a presenter bids on is also a big financial risk. Artist fees range between \$10,000-\$75,000 and when you include production costs and marketing, the all-in costs come in between \$20,000-\$100,000. At the current level of uncertainty, theatres have been reluctant to finalize terms for new shows until there is some assurance and timeframe about reopening and patron readiness surveys indicate they are ready to return. Larger theatres are going to need ramp up time reopening with the show inventory that is in play currently. Some lead time is needed in order to close deals, put shows/season on-sale, properly target markets, sell tickets, then plan production and present the event.
4. On a local level, presenters have a plethora of local and regional artists plus film and live captured broadcasts ready to present when small and large venues are permitted to open. This programming requires a much shorter period to get confirmed and on-sale to the public.
5. Presenters with large venues compete for shows by artists who sell in the 800-2000 ticket range. If venue occupancy is lowered, NH venues will not have access to headliner talent. Pivoting to operate as a small venue is not something that can be done quickly as presenters book the majority of their shows 8-18 months in advance of the performance date.
6. Large historic presenting theatres are only financially viable at their full occupancy levels. Reducing audience occupancy to meet the 6-foot social distancing requirement tips the scale in the wrong direction and is not sustainable.
7. In NH's historic presenting theatres, it is impossible to meet social distancing guidelines in our backstage areas where space is very limited and local production and touring artists must work in close contact with each other.

8. Given the lost revenue, presenters do not have the financial resources to purchase PPE and other equipment to meet new requirements for cleaning, sanitizing and social distancing for our patrons

### **Recommendations for Moving Ahead**

1. **Immediately establish a working group of presenting theatre professionals and state health leaders to review the Universal Guidelines New Hampshire has issued and incorporate many of the venue specific guidelines outlined in the Event Safety Alliance workbook.** Circulate a draft document within the field and revise as needed. The goal would be to establish a uniform set of protocols that NH presenting theatres would all follow. State Arts Council staff could coordinate this process with a completion deadline of May 27. Create similar working groups for the other subsectors of the arts community: producing theatres, museums and galleries, educational arts programs and festivals. Simultaneously with this effort, **establish a special fund administered by the NH State Council on the Arts or the NH Community Development Finance Authority to provide grants to cover the costs of retrofitting or the purchasing of new equipment that improves theatres ability to sanitize and provide hands-free solutions for hand washing, food and beverage transactions, and PPE equipment.**
2. **Obtain the services of local safety and health officials to advise arts presenters on implementing protocols and guidelines given the physical limitations and unique layouts of these facilities.** Ingress and egress, separation in the theatres, food and beverage service, restroom occupancy levels are all areas of concern. Though we are actively working on designing mitigation plans to address these issues, many of the operational guidelines we have reviewed from other states are not practical and individual accommodations to specific sites will be needed.
3. As part of this process, New Hampshire's leading health safety and science advisors and theatre professionals should meet to discuss the trajectory of COVID infections in NH and **clearly layout the benchmarks on the reduction of presence and spread of the disease that are needed to be met to lift the ban on public gatherings in New Hampshire. This would also include information on a projected timetable given the data collection and modeling the state is doing. It is also important to share information about how public gatherings will come back. Will they be permitted to come back at intervals by the size of the crowd in a certain period of time? For example: events of 50 people will be allowed in July with the expectation that number will be increased to 100 in August and conditions permitting, gatherings of any size will resume in September. Or, will the Governor lift the ban all at once if certain benchmarks have been met?** Absent this type of information almost all of NH's producing theatres have cancelled their summer performing seasons. The presenting theatres are anxious to avoid that fate. Living in this limbo is exceedingly frustrating and costly. We need some markers and a timeline. We understand that conditions with the

virus may change the pace of reopening but having no information and guidance at this point is untenable.

4. The entire arts community is interested in learning more about **business liability** issues surrounding reopening. **Please include nonprofit arts organizations in invitations to educational webinars on this topic.**
5. In our rosy forecasting here is how the presenting theatres would like to have reopening work. If conditions move in a positive direction and health indicators and benchmarks identified and defined in step 3 are met, **all theatres and performance venues in NH would be permitted to open on July 1 at or close to full capacity limits as defined by venue occupancy permits. The announcement of this re-opening date would take place by the Governor's Office on or before June 1 to provide ramp up time for preparations.** Presenting theatres are looking to offer patrons who are ready for something to do outside of their homes the chance to enjoy a film or performance with others, albeit safely. The summer months will also allow the theatres to test and refine their new cleaning, sanitizing and distancing protocols before the major parts of their seasons kick in after Labor Day.
6. **Unfortunately, this rosy scenario is looking less promising by the day.** The coronavirus continues to spread across the country and is especially virulent for populations working in confined facilities (meat packing plants, nursing homes etc.). Performing arts tours often begin in cities like New York, Nashville, and LA and visit multiple small cities and towns before reaching NH communities. Artists and crews from these tours will have worked shoulder to shoulder with other local stage crews in multiple communities and masks, gloves and distancing protocols can only do so much in the confines of dressing rooms and stages. Every winter, bands and theatre ensembles pass colds and flu on to CCA stage crews. There is definitely a risk that the coronavirus could arrive in our communities the same way.
7. **NH Historic Presenting Theatres are fully committed to reopening only when it is reasonably safe for our artists, patrons, staff, volunteers, and communities.** And as I said at the beginning of my remarks, we only get one shot to get this right. Our nightmare scenario is a sustained closure followed by a short reopening only to be closed down again because the coronavirus has caught fire and a stay at home order is re-issued. Given the financial blows we have already experienced, we cannot sustain a yo-yo year of openings and closings resulting in low ticket sales with few revenue generating opportunities with our limited show rosters, depressed contributed revenues and a continual flurry of tour cancellations and rescheduled shows. As we move into this reopening phase of the economy in the next few weeks, we ask the Governor and state public health leaders to stay in close communication with the arts sector and play it straight. Give us the nuanced story about the risks of bringing large community gatherings and events back into our theatres. As much as we collectively want to reopen, individual organizations need to assess the risk for themselves and for some,

they might look at all the factors and decide to remain dark for part or all of the 2020-21 programming year.

Thank you for listening to this crash course in presenting theatres and for considering our recommendations. We are ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work with all of the parties that need to come together to bring the entire arts sector back to life so it can continue to enrich the lives of our citizens and visitors and renew the strong economic impact we have on our towns and cities.