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Public Comment

Restarting The Arts: Best Practices For Safely Reopening

**Dear Assembly members,**

Thank you for convening this hearing on this critically important topic. I am the Executive Director of Center Stage Theater, a 130-seat non-profit rental venue located in the heart of downtown Santa Barbara. In a normal year we welcome 14,000 to 15,000 audience members to enjoy performances by roughly 1,600 artists from 70-80 different producers. As an intimate theater we cater primarily to community based organizations here in Santa Barbara. Like everyone else, we were shut down in March. Fortunately in June we were able to certify to reopen for video production but that is where all progress stopped.

Despite the fact that there have been numerous different guidelines produced throughout the country by a wide variety of organizations on safe reopening plans for the performing arts the state of California, here 11 months into this crisis, has yet to provide any guidelines addressing live performance. In the fall, prompted only by a 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment lawsuit, the state made a bit of a head fake toward producing guidelines but no actual action was taken. This is a completely unacceptable situation.

We are a critical part of the California economy, we have employees that count on us and yet we have absolutely no information on how to proceed. I am not even arguing at this point the exact things that would be safe at each tier in the reopening plan, we can't argue those points because there is not even a plan. I know that numerous organizations throughout the state have produced proposed plans and presented them to various health departments and different government organizations but still nothing.

For other industries they can at least look to the state guidelines, and develop plans based on what is allowed in each of the tiers. When I get calls from our community artists asking what is the plan, when will we be able to open at some level, all I can say to them is that I have no idea. We can't begin to plan because we have no information. The live performing arts need the plans in advance, as much as any other industry. We need to know that the requirements are so we can begin to implement them, both physically and into our behaviors. Performing arts don't spring forth immediately. They require planning, rehearsal and development. We can't even plan to do that when we have no information.

There have been state reopening guidelines out for months for houses of worship. I am completely mystified by the idea that someone a performance space is drastically different from a house of worship. There is no logic to this argument. In both cases you have audiences that come into a space, are seated and then different people address them with words and music. The logistics and science of doing this safely should be the same, and should be based on the science and not on the content of what those "performers" are presenting. The truth is that the live performance industry is actually much better suited to reopening safely than the houses of worship. We are experts at people moving. Unlike houses of worship, we know exactly who is in our audiences, normally have contact information for all of them and know exactly who

was seated where within the space. Contact tracing for a performance would be much easier than for a worship service, or wedding for example. We already employ people movers in the roles of ushers and house managers. Telling people how they can safely enter, what their behavior needs to be within the space, and correcting their behavior within the space. Telling someone they have to keep their mask on, sit in a certain place, and use hand sanitizer, is not all that different than telling them to stop taking pictures or using their cell phone.

At one point this summer I was certified to open safely for video production, so I had guidelines on how to safely have performers in the space. At the same time, I was able to certify as a movie theater, so I had guidelines on how to safely have an audience in the space. I don't begin to understand how if I can do both of these things separately, how is it that we can't even discuss doing them at the same time. I understand that combining the two, would require some additional precautions, but it is not such a leap that it can't even be talked about. I would be happy to direct you to the numerous studies and guidelines that are out there. As I am writing this I am listening to a conversation right now to a presentation on "The Roadmap to Recovery" produced by the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University working with The Healthy Buildings Program at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. This is the third version of the Roadmap they have produced. The information is out there. For California to be so far behind on this issue is just ridiculous.

I am not suggesting that the doors should be thrown open tomorrow, or that anyone wants to do anything unsafely. I am simply asking, why can't we at least be given a plan. What will the parameters be in each tier. The science is out there to tell us how we can do this safely. Performances are being done around the world. Our industry has been diligent about doing studies on all of the elements around reopening safely. We need to be able to work our way back and we need to be able to plan. I urge you to help us make our case, this vital and important part of our community and economy can't be ignored any longer.

Thank you for taking the time to have this hearing, and for listening to our voices.

If you have any questions or need any other information you can reach me at the office at 805-963-8198, or my cell phone 805-252-9146 or by email at [cstheater@sbcoxmail.com](mailto:cstheater@sbcoxmail.com). Thank you for your help on this critical issue.

Sincerely,



Teri Ball  
Executive Director  
Center Stage Theater