

Theatrical Producers League of Los Angeles



February 2, 2021

Good morning Madame Chair and members of the Committee,

Thank you for including me in this morning's hearing and for your commitment to the arts. My name is Martha Demson and I am the Board President of the Theatrical Producers League of Los Angeles, "TPLLA", a trade association for small and mid sized nonprofit theatres.

TPLLA is a young trade association, just under 10 years old. But together, our member organizations form the engine that propels so many of the dreams of emerging and BIPOC artists. These artists need a place where they can make their voices heard, where their work can be championed, and where they can make connections and advance careers without encountering the paywall of casting director workshops, expensive training programs or showcases. We provide that place.

Shortly after the pandemic began, I became deeply concerned with the question of HOW we -- the performing arts community -- would come back from COVID. How would we keep artists and patrons safe?... and how would we convince them that we could do so?... and how could we make them feel comfortable that we were doing so? I decided TPLLA should reach out to our theatrical labor union partners to formulate a plan. They each had retained notable epidemiologists and I thought if I could convince representatives from each labor union to join me in a room, together we could assemble comprehensive guidelines addressing the safety needs and concerns of all the artists who collaborate in the creation of live performance, and whose work puts them especially at risk.

It took some persuasion, but finally our Joint Labor-Management Covid Safety Task Force was assembled. And as far as I know, our task force is the only one of its kind in the country, where representatives of each union have sat down with each other and with producers to work on a comprehensive set of safety recommendations.

Even though our TPLLA companies are small, I believe we are uniquely well positioned to respond to the COVID crisis. I don't think many would feel comfortable attending a packed concert or a huge touring production. But what if people were able to go to a botanical garden or a zoo or a museum sculpture garden that was already approved to reopen, and what if when they got there, there was a string quartet playing, or a series of dance soloists performing, or a magician dazzling everyone with sleight of hand? Small, small performances for small numbers of people was the way to start I thought. This would be a way for people to learn how to gather safely, all spread out, wearing masks, outside. And this would be a way for producers and artists to learn how to produce and perform safely in a pandemic. The big production houses might not be interested right away. But the vast network of small arts organizations wouldn't hesitate. And wouldn't that start to heal our communities?

In a telebriefing with Dr Ferrer and Jean Armbruster at the LA Dept of Public Health, I mentioned that I was working with representatives from the theatrical labor unions to develop a strategy for an incremental return to live performance. They were intrigued. They had just recently received the "White Paper" from the Film, Television and Music industries. That was also a joint endeavor of management and labor, and it has been successful not only in providing a roadmap to reopen the sector, but also in keeping large numbers of working artists healthy. The LA Dept of Public Health encouraged us to put together something similar for the Performing Arts. Our Task Force decided to take this challenge on.

This afternoon, we will be sharing with this Committee and with the Administration, the Executive Summary of our principles and recommendations for an incremental return to live performance. We have recommendations for safety protocols to support live performance at every Tier Level, starting with work outdoors at Drive Ins and Partner Venues, then adding work indoors to film or live stream performances with no audience, until we arrive at work in larger and more traditional performance spaces, indoors and outdoors, always maintaining robust physical distancing both onstage and in the house, thoughtfully limiting total occupancy, requiring frequent PCR testing for our performers and production staff, enforcing mask wearing, sanitation and disinfection, paying special attention to ventilation in all indoor spaces, and insisting that personal responsibility be taken for hygiene and offsite behavior by everyone on the production team. Our entire set of recommendations runs 70 pages, but the Executive Summary provides a much shorter and reasonably comprehensive overview. I hope you will read it.

Performing Arts producers know how to manage audiences. And we in the theatre have a long history of dealing with complicated safety protocols. Returning artists and patrons to live performance in a manner that feels reassuringly safe and that brings everyone joy and strengthens resilience -- we can do that.

We need your help now in encouraging this Administration to issue more detailed guidelines for a safe reopening of the performing arts. Ideally, the Administration will work with our joint Labor-Management Task Force; we have invested months of time and collective effort into detailing what we believe is needed. In addition, I encourage this Committee to look for additional funding for our small and mid-sized organizations. Any return to live performance safely is going to bring significant additional costs that our organizations cannot absorb. With the costs of compliance with AB5 and the impact of being closed for eleven months and counting, we need significant financial relief. Otherwise I am so afraid that many of our vibrant, small organizations are at risk of never coming back at all and that will deal a terrible blow to the California economy and to our all important entertainment pipeline that we may never recover from.

Thank you for your time.