

# In a Pandemic First, 3 American Theaters Will Do Indoor Shows

The venues, all small nonprofits in New England, will be permitted by Actors' Equity to put on work with union actors.

 By Michael Paulson

Aug. 25, 2020

The union representing stage actors in the United States has agreed to allow its members to take part in indoor productions at three small theaters, making possible the first such shows since the coronavirus pandemic closed theaters across the nation in March.

All three theaters are nonprofits in New England, where virus cases are low. The region has already been home to the first two outdoor productions featuring union actors during the pandemic.

The union, Actors' Equity, said it had agreed to allow its members to work on three shows that will run in repertory at the Weathervane Theater in the White Mountains region of New Hampshire, as well as in a one-man show at Music Theater of Connecticut and a one-woman show at Northern Stage in Vermont.

The New Hampshire productions would be a particularly important milestone because they involve multiple actors performing together. Among the shows planned is a seven-actor version of "Little Shop of Horrors"; the theater is still figuring out how to stage a sadistic dental exam and several encounters with a man-eating plant, but is pledging to limit physical contact between actors (and yes, that means Audrey and Seymour will not kiss).

Equity has been flooded with 127 requests, and counting, from theaters seeking to resume producing shows, but most have been turned down because they are from parts of the country where the pandemic remains uncontrolled.

The theaters being allowed to open are all committing to frequent virus testing (and results within 48 hours) for actors, small audiences with social distancing, and modern heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems that allow for a high level of filtration and circulation.

**SIGN UP FOR THE THEATER UPDATE NEWSLETTER:** *Every week, stay on top of the top-grossing Broadway shows, recent reviews, Critics' Picks and more.*

[Sign Up](#)

"Many of our members are anxious to get back to work, and we are anxious to see the American theater back up and running," said Mary McColl, the union's executive director. "But we also understand it's a real obligation on our part to do our best to make sure people are as safe as can be, and that's an obligation that weighs heavy."

The New Hampshire theater will run its shows — a comedy called "Miracle on South Division Street," the Kander and Ebb musical revue "The World Goes 'Round," and "Little Shop" — in a 266-seat theater where only 44 seats will be for sale.



Among the Weathervane productions will be a scaled-back "Little Shop of Horrors" (shown here Off Broadway, with Jonathan Groff). Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

The company, a longtime summer stock theater which turned to streaming productions this season and was already planning to add fall shows, is not only in a rural area, but also owns a 62-room inn where it ordinarily houses actors. More than 20 staff members and actors have been quarantining there since early June.

The Weathervane shows will be fully staged, with some modifications: no wind or brass instruments in the band, for example, because of a concern that those instruments could spread the virus. Masks will be required for patrons when up and about, but optional when people are seated and socially distanced.

“This is about building a bridge to whatever is on the other side,” said Ethan Paulini, the producing artistic director. “It’s about exploring that now, and exploring that safely, as opposed to sticking our heads in the sand and waiting for it to blow over — then we will have missed the opportunity for real creativity.”



During the summer, the theater turned to streaming shows, including a revue that featured the intern Sunayna Smith, center. Lew Whitener

Music Theater of Connecticut, located in Norwalk, is planning to stage the comedy “Fully Committed” before audiences of no more than 25 people, in accordance with local regulations; the theater will also offer up to 85 tickets to watch each performance online, making for a total audience of 110, the theater’s normal capacity.

The play, by Becky Mode, had a Broadway run in 2016 starring Jesse Tyler Ferguson. The performer in Connecticut, Matt Densky, had been touring in the cast of “Wicked”; he will be tested for the virus weekly. The theater’s air conditioning system has been altered to increase fresh air circulation, said Kevin Connors, its executive artistic director. The audience will also be masked and socially distanced.

Northern Stage, in White River Junction, Vt., is finalizing plans to present “It’s Fine, I’m Fine,” an autobiographical play about career-ending soccer concussions, written and performed by Stephanie Everett. The theater will follow similar protocols to the others: only 44 people (masked and distanced) will be allowed in the 240-seat space, according to Irene Green, the managing director.

A variety of indoor and outdoor productions have been mounted around the country with nonunion actors, but Equity, which represents 51,000 performers and stage managers, has taken a hard line, initially barring its members from in-person auditions, rehearsals and performances, citing safety concerns.

It has recently been granting permission for participation on a case-by-case basis, saying its top priority is the health of its members. The union hired Dr. David Michaels, who headed OSHA during the Obama presidency, as a consultant, and has said it would allow its members to work only in areas where the pandemic is under control — and only under conditions that include frequent testing of actors and stage managers, and staff who interact with them.

McColl said that the union’s membership has been divided over how soon to participate in reopening. “There are members who think we should withhold everybody’s services until there’s a vaccine, and there are members who say, ‘I have autonomy; I want to do this work; Get out of my way!’” she said. “It’s our job to walk that midline and do the best we can to keep people safe.”

The union has also agreed to allow a seaside theater in New Jersey, the East Lynne Theater Company, to stage and film a two-person play, “Nothing Matters,” but that production will have no live audience. Instead, it will be streamed for six weeks on YouTube, with tickets at \$15, said Gayle Stahlhuth, the artistic director. (On a larger scale, the union has also agreed to let the Broadway company of the “Diana” musical perform for a Netflix taping.)

And the union has agreed to allow the Front Porch Arts Collective, a Black theater company, to stage a weekend of cabaret performances in a Cambridge, Mass., parking lot under the auspices of Central Square Theater.

Equity had previously agreed to allow the Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, Mass., to stage an indoor production of a one-person play, "Harry Clarke," but Massachusetts would not permit indoor theater, so the show was moved outside. Equity has also allowed another Pittsfield company, the Berkshire Theater Group, to stage an outdoor production of "Godspell"; that show is now in the third week of a sold-out run that is scheduled to continue until early September.

Michael Paulson is the theater reporter. He previously covered religion, and was part of the Boston Globe team whose coverage of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. @MichaelPaulson

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 7 of the New York edition with the headline: Actors' Equity Gives OK to 3 Indoor Shows