

## DISCOVERY Ep. 20 - English

[00:02:48] Hello and welcome to Discovery conversations about the power of the arts to connect us to each other into place. I'm Victoria Rogers, vice president of arts here at the Knight Foundation. And today's conversation is called As mass gatherings come back into view. What's the new normal look like and what are the issues toward getting there? Joining me is Duncan Webb of Webb Management, author of Running Theater's Best Practices for Managers and Leaders, a certified management consultant and an active speaker on arts management and the development operation and financing of arts facilities. We want you to be really active participants in the conversation. We really want to be able to answer your questions. So if you have them, please submit through Twitter using the hashtag Night Live and on in the comments section of Facebook or YouTube. We'll get to them as many of them as we possibly can throughout the conversation. So, Duncan, welcome to Discovery.

[00:03:47] Hi, Victoria. Thanks for having me.

[00:03:50] It's a pleasure. So on January 9th, while speaking to a conference held by the Association of the Performing Arts Professionals, Dr. Fauci said he thinks theaters and other live entertainment venues will could reopen sometime in the fall of twenty twenty one with live entertainment return, depending on vaccination rollout and getting between 70 and 80 percent of the population vaccinated. But in a recent article in The New York Times, I know they're thinking about doing New York pop ups that are coming up starting later in April. But, you know, over the last year, while so many organizations and buildings have effectively gone into hibernation.

[00:04:35] Others have attempted to stay active with various programs and events, so coming out of covid, which of these groups is going to be better off?

[00:04:44] Oh yeah. Oops. I just. Sorry, I always do that. No problem, we can still hear you so great.

[00:04:54] Great question. So I really am worried about the groups who've gone into hibernation. I know they did it for good reason. They were trying to be sort of fiscally prudent and careful and but the groups that have stayed open, the groups that have tried to deliver value to their communities, the groups that have figured out how to do streaming, the groups that have identified and pursued new funding sources are way ahead of the groups that will be at some point in the next six months that are coming back to life. So I really worry that those groups coming out of hibernation are going to really struggle and scramble to catch up to the other groups. And in fact, also, I think the things that these groups have been discovering over the past year are just some of the same trends that we've been observing for the years before the pandemic.

[00:05:43] You know, this idea of streaming as sort of a supplemental part of what you deliver, this idea of sort of doubling down on education and outreach of the pursuit of different kinds of funding sources based on delivering value in the communities. And these are all very strong strategies that these groups are getting better and better out through this year. And they'll be in a much stronger position next fall or whatever it is that people can come back to the field.

[00:06:11] So, you know, related to that. Are these restrictions that are going to be placed on it? So, again, referencing the article in Theater Guide, you know, it said that 30 percent,

a maximum maximum occupancy or 50 people are looking frankly at. At which which they think would be the best way to come back into this, but live theater, a maximum of one hundred and fifties, with attendees possibly having to prove that they've been vaccinated or at least to provide a negative covid test. So I'm wondering is as institutions do open what they're going to have to be able to do and to. To get an audience to actually come back inside of a theater and what kind of changes that you've seen theater's actually going through to prepare for that, right?

[00:07:09] Oh, my gosh.

[00:07:10] Three different huge issues that I'd like to ask those broad question.

[00:07:16] Right. Let me try one at a time. So the first question is institutional preparation. So so what we're observing is that there are lots of organizations and buildings around the country which are doing a great job now of getting ready to reopen. So, for example, every week, in fact, at the same time, every every two weeks, I get to sit down on a call with the Mux group, which is the major university presenters. So these are the big performing arts centers on big university campuses like University of Iowa and Dartmouth and Stanford and Arizona State. So, you know, big buildings are very professional staffs. And these guys and girls have the resources of these big universities behind them helping to plan for reopening. So I sit in on this call of the production managers. So these really bright people who are on top of these issues, like ventilation and disinfecting and social distancing and all this stuff. So I'm not I'm not worried about that. Right. And there are many other buildings like that that are in pretty good shape. Who I am worried about is the thousands of other buildings that don't have those resources. So, for example, you know, the home of a producing theater company that when they start to come back to life will be first and foremost thinking about content. What are the shows that we're going to announce? And and then they'll start thinking about the venues and making them safe. And I'm also worried about all those sort of hundreds and hundreds of sort of civic theater, like when we worked out up in Lynn, Massachusetts, like it's a civic auditorium. It's operated by the city. There's like a staff of three people. They're wonderful. They kind of do everything. But there's you know, there's no way that they have the tools and resources to really think through sort of preparation for folks covid world. So we've got to find ways to get resources to those buildings and institutions to help them. The the guys and folks like that, they're they're in pretty good shape, but many others are going to need help. The second question is around getting audiences back. And they're like, I think the key is acknowledging that this is going to be a multi-year. Battle to get audiences to come back. There are, as these all of these surveys recently have shown, people have very different attitudes about what's safe and when it's safe and what what needs to happen before they come back and different parts of the country in different cities. So. But we're encouraging venues to do is to get in touch with their audiences now and to start doing sort of primary research and focus groups and things to figure out what those anxieties are and what is the what are the things that those audiences need to see and hear to gain that confidence needed to come back to the theater. Is it about relationships or distancing? Is it about reducing sort of points of human touch points and all that? Is it getting rid of concessions? No food in the venue? Is it getting rid of intermissions and all of that stuff? So I think it's a long slog and people in different places have very different views. So it needs to be a very sort of incremental approach. And then the hardest part of that is, is your comment about programing, because clearly just a lot of venues are just not can be put on the same stuff they were putting on before with capacity limitations. I've been talking to a lot of promoters and different buildings and they're quite certain that they're not going to put on a show unless they can achieve 80 to 90 percent of their sort of capacity goals in tandem. And that

just points to the fact that the margins in this world are so tight, you just can't say, well, I'm going to book that same show and, you know, we'll have a third of the audience we used to have. And that'll be fine because it won't be fun. They'll lose too much money. And, you know, people will be glad that they're open. But it's just difficult in terms of financial sustainability. So what that means is that these venues are going to have to find a product that can work economically in these reduced capacity spaces. And I think the most important aspect of that is working with local partners. So it's not going to be so much of a touring product. It's going to be more about working with arts organizations and artists in specific communities, partnering with them to get them up on the stage in an economic deal that kind of works for the artists.

[00:11:56] And then someone of our audience members, Michael, says, you know, I wouldn't mind going back to a theater. I'm fully vaccinated and I'll wear a mask. I wouldn't mind having someone next to me that does the same. But can we just have audience members agree to those two things? Is there can you legally can these institutions require that you what can we require, frankly, of people when they're coming in?

[00:12:26] So in different places and different jurisdictions, there are you have different abilities to push to certain requirements. You know, I'm and I think, frankly, I think it's up to the venues to establish a code of conduct or conditions for participation and and test those in the market and see if people feel that it's a is it an intrusion on their sort of rights to participate or is this is an appropriate level of control in order to make everyone safe?

[00:12:59] I think, you know, groups are going to some groups are going to go too far and there's going to be a backlash. And so it's going to be something that we figure out over time. But that I think initially groups need to go as far as they can to create a safe environment. If, you know, as this sort of fellow said, if that's the thing that makes him feel safe and that's what we have to push on.

[00:13:20] So Duncan and, you know, sort of midway through the some of the bleakest months of the pandemic, you started to see articles and even TV shots of theaters that were removing seats, that were putting out plaques that were any of them that were actually trying to perform, whether outside or very limited inside, having daily covid-19 tests for their actors, for the the creative teams. What have you seen people doing to accommodate? And then the second part of that is in so many of our cities, we have massive performance halls, whether for orchestras or ballet companies or even for theaters that seat. Twelve hundred people, in some cases, thirty two hundred people, so sort of across the board, what are you seeing that these institutions are doing about their physical spaces?

[00:14:23] Well, you know, there's not much you can do in those large fixed form houses. So, I mean, the larger the capacity, the more flexibility you have for social distancing. So that's good. And there's a fair amount I think you can do on the way that you have audiences enter and exit. I think we're sort of smart people are figuring out how to control the flow of traffic into the into the house and then out of the house to reduce that kind of logjams of people crowding at entrances and exits. So that becomes a little bit easier in larger venues. But, you know, in those spaces, again, it's it's going to be about figuring out programing that makes sense economically so that you can only have 500 people or a thousand people in a in a two to three thousand seat. And it's just it's it's the programing that ultimately is going to drive everything and the economics of that.

[00:15:18] And so what I know what it costs to do productions. So what does that answer to making it economically feasible? More runs. You can't try to cram in more people, fewer people on stage. What are what are some of the things that you're seeing around the development of content, whether it's new or people reimagining how something could be redone so smaller shows?

[00:15:49] I think we'll probably see more sort of non-equity productions touring in the theater world, smaller ensembles, smaller dance. I used to go for many years.

[00:16:03] I went to the encore series at City Center, you know, do these sort of concert versions of sort of lost musicals. And I had been advocating that that's the kind of thing that we need to do in some of these venues initially. So not fully stage versions of musicals, but more concert versions, limited stage and smaller musical ensembles on stage potentially, or in the theater or maybe even not live, but a way that you can sort of capture the magic of live performance without necessarily all the different bands that go with them. And the other great the thing I loved about encores for all those years was when when you went to the Saturday matinee, there was a talk back so that cast would disappear and then they'd all come back on stage. And it was fabulous. And it was just a great sort of New York experience to sit for another hour with the cast and directors and talk about these shows. And that's something I think we can do. So so sort of smaller, sort of less staged, but also adding that sort of talk back component to create a more sort of enriching and engaging experience.

[00:17:11] That was one of the things that I'll get to that in a minute. But here in Miami, which is where the foundation is based, Miami new drama has really tried some interesting things and one that they got a lot of play in The New York Times was for their production of the Seven Deadly Sins, and they actually used vacant storefronts on Lincoln Road on the beach. And you sat in a pod socially distance and you moved as a group from one to the other. But it was so when the stories were so well written and amazingly acted. It gave support and financial support to artists for not only writing these productions, but for actually performing them as well. People felt safe. So that's that's one that I saw. I also was able to attend one of the few outdoor nutcrackers in this case presented by the Miami City Ballet out in Doral, which is another city outside of Miami proper. But what was so interesting about that was the entire first act. Was actually digital, it was from prerecorded from the previous season when all the costumes had change done by Isabel and Ruben blanky on their last names designed by them, but people didn't really know the difference for the first half. The second half was live. And then we've seen some other things with the other day that another Miami City ballet production that was outside on the Arsht Center, so. So many artists are just creative and have to perform and have to create what are some of the other things that you've seen during covid-19 that you think will stick around or some that you thought were incredibly effective at keeping people connected to the art forms so that all of the outdoor stuff has been great.

[00:19:18] And I and I think and we'll see the spring with New York City and other places are really sort of investing to support outdoor performances on on sort of blocks of streets and parks and public spaces. So that'll be that'll be fun. And maybe we'll see more of that in the longer term. But I think the you know, we we do need to get back into the indoor performance spaces. And I think they're the things that matter are that coming out of code. It is that that we've seen so many organizations start to invest more in education and outreach and and discovering that that's been a great way to stay in touch with their community and to deliver value. And I think those are the things that those groups have learned through covid are really going to continue on. And they will continue to invest in

education and outreach, which is about access and equity and serving underserved communities, that the funding community has responded very positively to all of that. So I think a lot of groups and buildings are motivated to do that. And that means a lot of outbound program, not just inbound, but, you know, an arts center delivering artists out into schools or neighborhoods.

[00:20:33] So I think of buildings becoming sort of a hub out of which sort of creative energy flows. So that's a good thing. And then the other good thing, as you mentioned, is, is streaming. You know, everyone we've sort of jumped on the bandwagon, but we're discovering that that it may be a good place to stay for the long term. The technology's better. The platforms are better. Groups are running out to monetize streaming in various ways, in many cases, not necessarily to the extent that's really required yet. But they're sort of where we're headed in a good direction, in the same way that streaming like Netflix, they're figuring out now how to make more money. So will the monetizing part, I think will come. We just need to keep sort of trying and experimenting and innovating around different ways to sort of drive earned revenue as well as contributed. So streaming is absolutely here to stay. The thing that I still wondering about streaming is because I don't think that that we have sort of creatively caught up to the medium yet. No, I don't think that we have a lot of young sort of artistic souls who really figured out how to how to take full advantage of streaming as as a medium of expression. What's different than television? It's so how do you how do you bring all of those sort of possibilities of streaming like live and recording them and people talking over and behind and interviewing and bringing social media into it? I think there's a lot of great things that will hopefully happen in the next couple of years as that as the medium of streaming starts to mature.

[00:22:15] I think that I want to get into that with with another question, but. We're seeing the creation of performance that is designed for a digital audience, which is very different than streaming, what is designed for a theater or or streaming an orchestra performance that you're doing, and that there are nuances to that. And somebody emailed me the other day and said so. You know, if you're in a movie theater or if you're in a theater and the lights go down and you can feel the excitement and you're sitting with other people, it is that incredible, wonderful, visceral experience of the arts. But what has to happen if you're streaming something to create that? I don't care how large your screen is in your home, you're still distracted by the fact, at least I am. And so I think that there's a real opportunity for the design of things that are that are done for this particular for an online audience. But I have a question from the show. With performing art centers in other countries such as Australia opening up to audiences, is it possible that these centers in other countries could serve as a template or an example for what we might do here in the US?

[00:23:43] Yes, yes. And there's good research has been coming back from some studies in Germany recently about the relative safety of bringing groups together in theaters. But again, you know, it's like with the Doctor Croce's reality through the last year. I mean, to a certain extent, facts can get you so far, but it's really about people's beliefs and perceptions and emotions, because all of this is a very sort of emotional thing. Do I feel safe going? Yeah. So we can have these studies. But I think it's like people need to see other people returning home safely from the theater and sort of reinforcing that idea and then they'll come back. I want to say something more about your comment on streaming. Know it's to me, it's it's a lot of it is about finding new ways to engage audiences because that's what you can do with that medium. So just as an example, I've been trying to help a group recently. They've come up with this technology that would allow somebody who's watching a performance to toggle between different cameras during the performance so their body cameras or cameras located in different parts of the theater and the viewer gets

to choose. So the viewer clicks on camera one to see that certain perspective that way. Then they can click to a body camera that's following a performer during this. And I think that's something that will be very appealing to younger audiences. Right. It's kind of a it's sort of like game to get to the play. They're more actively engaged. They choose their perspective. And that kind of thing makes the experience more engaged.

[00:25:20] Well, one of the one of the things that we've seen throughout the pandemic is the fact that people that were going on line to access arts and culture were trying things that they never would have tried in person. And so when you get back to your comment about. The real important thing is how do you serve an audience, how do you invest in them? So in turn they invest in you. And I think that that has to do with diversity and equity and listening and engaging your audiences in the conversation. So I think that there are a lot of ways that both funders can look at ensuring that there is equity as far as who is funded to do this work, but that the companies themselves really start to talk to audiences about what's important to them. What are we in the development? Because arts has always told our stories, both individual and corporate. But I wanted to get to another question here is I saw something that you recently wrote, a trend you referred to as from Friday Night Lights to the Community Living Room.

[00:26:33] What are you talking about with that? Sorry. So it's sort of my favorite soundbite.

[00:26:38] And it is it is a reflection. It's the trend we're trying to push all of our clients and venues to. So the old image of a theater was the marquee lights up on a Friday night and fancy people wearing their fancy clothes come to a fancy performance. That's that's the that's the old image of a theater. The new image of a theater is the idea of the community living. It's a building that's always open, it's always active. There's always something going on there. It's much more inclusive and it's much more sort of deeply engaged with the life of the community. And this is the direction we're pushing all of our buildings and clients around the country. And I am and it's it's a direction that that most communities really embrace. So this idea that we are not that we are not the fancy place for fancy people, we are a place for everyone. And we're going to figure out what our community needs and we're going to offer them we're going to bring the community together in this place where we share our creativity and cultural heritage for the benefit of our community. So, you know, it's a it's a silly little soundbite, but it really does capture a very powerful idea. And I think many communities to embrace this.

[00:27:48] I've got another question here. This is from from Brenda. Do you expect any venue operations to change over the long term in response to consumer anxiety?

[00:27:58] Sort of. One of his things is like requiring masks during a heightened local flu season. So let's say we're post pandemic, but what are those things that you think people are really going to want to require before they're willing? To go back and just come back into the.

[00:28:17] Yeah, I think the key is that the theaters need to be able to change daily. And, you know, we need to be able to respond to issues and anxieties and events that are occurring as they occur. Different perceptions about safety and security and all these things. So the old days where there was a little guilt sign painted that in the lobby that told you what you have to do, that's gone. We need to be able to change that. The rules and change of venues operate and change how audiences behave and how we respond to that as as the world evolves and changes in a very sort of adaptive manner. So there's no

more set of rules written down for all time. It's all about now. Find it to be the community and the environment as it is today.

[00:29:06] I think one of the things, again, that and we're going to wrap it, wrap it up sort of with this comment, this came from the culture track survey of communities in a time of distress. And it was all about the opportunity that's been created for. Digital interplay with people and making sure that we can reach audiences in a number of ways, but I really think, Duncan, that I'd like for you to just mention your book and what you've done with it and how people can access that. And, of course, for those of you who are interested in any consultancies with Web management, we encourage you to do that as well. Of course.

[00:29:58] Thank you for that shameless plug, it is a shameless plug, but go ahead.

[00:30:02] OK, so, so so we wrote a book in 2005 called Running Theaters Best Practices. And the idea was we interviewed 40 managers of buildings around North America and sort of captured those best practices around programing and fundraising and marketing and all that. And then we've just done a second edition, which is really interesting to do and to see the sort of evolution of the field. What are the issues that are now more important? So a lot more of an emphasis now on safety and security, community engagement, diversity, equity and inclusion operations that run buildings, the programing and audience engagement. And of course, that book gets published in a matter of months. So I don't know if we'll do a third edition anytime soon. But, you know, there there we now have to deal with this whole additional set of issues of the of the short term and again, the longer term issues coming coming out of which which are significant. But as I said earlier, I think in many ways would cover this challenge is just accelerated the trends that we already saw, the importance of sort of checking in with your sort of mission related to the value you deliver to the community, the importance of staying connected to your audience as of what it is that they're more the importance of programing that responds to the economic environment, the importance of streaming, the importance of education, and of the importance of a kind of outdoor, informal programing before events, after events, sort of taking emphasis away from, you know, the eight o'clock curtain to creating a broader event that starts early or goes later, moves to different spaces and engages more of the community.

[00:31:47] You know, I think it's times change, people change in our attitudes, change as the experiences that we want. But today it would be a quick 30 minutes. So our time is up. I want to thank all of you for being with us today. Special thanks to Duncan and our production crew who are absolutely amazing. Just wanted to tell you, the beats of the top of the show were created by Chris Bar. And the music that you'll hear as we go out is performed and composed by the greats. Aaron Brown of ACRON is a pianist, but the next Night Live episode is One of Nights Feature of Democracy series. And please join us on March 18th.

[00:32:30] The topic will be Design Principles of a Good Conversation with Emily Shanly Wright, economist, president and CEO of the Institute for Human Studies. And the next Discovery episode will be on April 8th, where the topic will be the ongoing lack of diversity in theater. So I really hope you all will join us again. And thanks so much for being with us today.

[00:32:52] Have a great one. Thank you. Thanks, Duncan.