

Nova Scotia

Some arts groups eager to restart live performances, but others taking it slow

'I don't want things to return to normal. I want things to be better.'

[Vernon Ramesar](#) · CBC News · Posted: Feb 14, 2021 4:45 PM AT | Last Updated: February 14



With eased restrictions, the Lunenburg Academy of Music Performance plans to host one-hour concerts twice a week until Mar. 10. (Vernon Ramesar/CBC)

When the province announced on Feb. 5 that audiences could attend live performances again starting the following Monday, it got a mixed response.

Some arts groups leaped at the opportunity. But others have been more cautious.

When Burt Wathen heard the announcement he wanted to hold a concert on the first day audiences were allowed back.

"I said, well, let's do a concert ... on Monday," said the founder of Lunenburg Academy of Musical Performance. "And, of course, my staff said, no, that's not possible.

"So we decided to have the first concert on Valentine's Day."

Prior to the change, he said his organization had been puzzled about why concert halls could not open with limited capacity. He said they were grateful that the adjustment was made and are eager to resume performances.

"Our residents were thrilled and had everything ready," he said.



Burt Wathen, the founder of Lunenburg Academy of Music Performance, wanted to restart live concerts the day the restrictions were lifted. (George Sadi/CBC)

The academy plans to host one-hour concerts twice a week in their auditorium until Mar. 10.

Wathen said that before the clampdown on live performances with an audience last fall, the academy held 35 live performances between September and the middle of December. He said they were all well attended.

More cautious

Other arts groups are taking a more cautious approach to eased restrictions, citing various concerns.



Bill VanGorder said the Theatre Arts Guild will not be doing in-person performances until the COVID-19 situation stabilizes. (David Laughlin/CBC)

Bill VanGorder, a spokesperson for the non-profit Theatre Arts Guild in Halifax, said the theatre did four or five full productions every year at their 90-seat venue.

But he said current restrictions limit capacity to 25 audience members and the company has opted against in-person performances.

According to VanGorder, all public health protocols are in place, but they will continue to only do Zoom and radio performances until the COVID-19 situation stabilizes.

"Also, we know that the patrons are not all comfortable yet about coming back to the theatre," he said.

"The new regulations that just came out do allow more flexibility in rehearsals and the number of actors on stage and that sort of thing, which was a problem before."

He said when more people are vaccinated and there's more predictability around restrictions, the goal of the theatre is to "come back gently and slowly" so that performers, backstage workers and audience members are all comfortable with the process.

Paying the bills

The lack of income from performances has proven to be a challenge.

VanGorder said there is no mortgage on the property and maintenance is done by volunteers, but heating and electricity along with other costs are about \$2,000 a month.

Paying the bills has been something of a mixed bag for 2b theatre company, based in Halifax. The company creates original works and tours them across Canada and the world.

"We've been, I think, relatively speaking, one of the lucky ones," said Christian Barry, a founder of the company and its artistic director. "We don't have a lot of overhead. A lot of our expenses are correlated with our activity.

"So, when international touring shut down, that meant we were making less money. Yes. But it also meant we were spending less."

Barry said they have been able to continue their work in digital ways and in small numbers in safe spaces.

Christian Barry of 2b theatre said people will eventually crave the audience experience and return to live performances. (Alejandro Santiago)

That includes the creation of *Great Little Works* — performances designed for "bubble audiences" of up to 10 people that can be done safely in living rooms or backyards.

Like VanGorder, Barry believes that audiences are still reluctant to attend live performances, even with restrictions in place, but he is hopeful that the situation will change over time.

"I do think people will, as they reconcile their comfort in being in spaces together again, crave it, need it and come back to it," he said.

Barry said although they do not plan to perform for large groups in the immediate future, the relaxed restrictions will allow them to include audiences in the process of developing their works.

Long-term effects

There are concerns about the long-term damage a year of restrictions and a lack of audiences will have on the arts community.

Wathen said it has been "horrible."

"We are going to lose a generation of young artists," he said. "Many fantastic, superlative young performers have already left the profession, have taken jobs elsewhere. They don't see it getting better."

He said despite the challenges, it has been important for the Lunenburg academy to remain open to allow young artists to work together live rather than taking virtual lessons and doing virtual performances.

It's a concern shared by Barry who said companies need to ask what opportunities have been lost and "what has been lost in the moment."

But even as the pandemic drags on, there still seems to be a level of optimism in the arts community that better days are ahead.

"I don't want things to return to normal," Wathen said. "I want things to be better. I'm looking for a better future for everybody. Let's hope that it comes sooner than later."

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