

# Southwest Florida theaters, arts groups are hurting. Some might not make it.

Theater seats are empty. Stage lights are dark.

Everything's closed.

Now many Southwest Florida arts groups are facing the same heart-breaking possibility: If the coronavirus continues to rage, some of them might never open again.

"This is the kind of thing that kills arts groups," New Phoenix Theatre wrote March 13 on Facebook.

"Thousands of professional jobs — in full-time, part-time and contract positions; people who work hard and love what they do — are at stake."

Two weeks later, almost everything has gone dark in the Fort Myers/Naples area, including theaters, orchestras and opera companies.

And arts groups are struggling financially during what's usually their busiest, most lucrative time of the year.

More closings: What events in SWFL are canceled, postponed because of the coronavirus?

Going dark: Mann Hall and more Fort Myers, Cape Coral theaters shut down over coronavirus

Performing arts halls are closed — either for a few weeks or the rest of the season. Plays and concerts are canceled or postponed. And so are many of the fundraisers that arts groups rely on to keep themselves going into next season.

That's why groups say they need donations now more than ever — especially local theaters, which seem to be harder hit than other arts groups. But making matters worse: Many Southwest Florida residents have already lost their jobs and are struggling to make ends meet themselves.



*Players Circle Theatre ran just one performance of "A Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time." Then it canceled the rest of the play's run due to coronavirus fears (Photo: Special to The News-Press)*

“Obviously, everyone’s hurting right now, and it’s a tough time to ask for money,” says Greg Longenhagen, artistic director for Florida Repertory Theatre. “But for Florida Rep, it is a make-it-or-break-it time.

“We need people now more than we’ve ever needed them. ... If we’re going to make it until the fall, we need money now.”

Things are so bad, Players Circle Theatre in North Fort Myers even considered filing for bankruptcy recently, says founder and producing artistic director Bob Cacioppo. They ultimately decided against it, though.

“It’s been so stressful,” Cacioppo says. “I’ll be honest with you — we’re barely squeaking by.”

Cacioppo and his new theater have had a particularly bad run of luck. Their scheduled December opening got delayed because its Shell Factory space hadn’t passed the fire marshal’s inspection. So they ended up staging their first production under a tent, at a country club and in a makeshift theater space — all to less-than-expected crowds.

After that financial shortfall, Cacioppo said it would take the fledgling theater years to recover financially from its approximately \$200,000 in debt. Then along came COVID-19, and Players Circle’s big marquee play of the season — “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” — closed after just one performance to a tiny audience of about 25 people.

Cacioppo has likened his bad luck to the biblical story of Job. “I’m being tested!” he says and laughs.

Many other arts groups are in the same situation. Brenda Kensler, co-founder of New Phoenix Theatre, said she doesn’t have the money to keep the theater afloat if it remains closed.

Now she’s not sure if New Phoenix can survive.

“I think that remains to be seen,” she says. “I don’t know if we will. It remains to be seen.”

But despite the financial hardship and shaky future, most arts groups say closing was an essential thing to protect their audiences, performers and employees, and to stop the spread of the virus.

That’s why Artis—Naples decided to go dark through April 12, says spokeswoman Therese McDevitt. “We did so knowing — like all companies, small businesses and nonprofits during this challenging time — that it would have a dramatic impact on our finances. But it was the right thing to do. ... And we fully expect to come back strong as soon as is safely possible.”

Part of that comeback, though, comes down to fundraisers and donations. Many Southwest Florida arts groups say they’ll be lost without them.

Florida Rep counts on its annual gala fundraiser to raise about \$500,000 — a big chunk of the annual cost for staff and other operating costs, Longenhagen says. But they had to cancel the gala

and replace it with a Facebook Live event Saturday, including an online auction and streaming performances from the theater's actors.

Florida Rep's plays and even its summer camp schedule are at stake if they can't raise enough donations.

"I don't want to say that we're going to fold," Longenhagen says. "But we'd have to re-assess a lot of the things at the theater. A lot of that depends on how long this lasts (the coronavirus and social distancing).

"I think we'll get through this, but there has to be a group effort for us to survive."

And all that doesn't include the human cost to the people working at these arts groups. Many theaters and other groups have either laid off employees or drastically cut back on their work hours.

Gulfshore Playhouse laid off its 21 full-time employees and nine educational interns, leaving only its core leadership. And Broadway Palm laid off hundreds of employees from both the Fort Myers dinner theater and two national touring companies.

"Toughest day of my career," owner Will Prather wrote March 16 on Facebook. "And this s&\*t is brutal!"

Other arts groups are in a better position, financially. At least for now.

Punta Gorda Symphony, for example, had already performed its last concert of the season on March 8 — about a week before most arts groups started going dark. Now the orchestra is processing renewals for its just announced 2020-21 season.

Executive director Craig Badinger says sales appear to be going at a normal rate.

"Of course, we have no idea who will choose not to renew until we finish our renewal process with a deadline of April 10," he says. "If normalcy does not return by November, it could be catastrophic to us — and we would be faced with very challenging decisions, along with every other performing arts organization in America."

Gulfshore Opera is also in a better financial position than some arts groups, says founder and artistic director Steffanie Pearce. Its small administrative staff has gone to summer hours for now, and its performers are all self-employed artists.

As for lost funds, Pearce says their core sponsors have stepped up donations, so the opera company expects to recoup some of its losses — as long as it's able to resume performances in May.

Meanwhile, they've postponed their Mann Hall debut, the opera "La Boheme," until Nov. 10, and they plan to bring back all the lead performers, directors and designers from Los Angeles, Houston and New York.

“Of course that will cost the company a chunk of change to get them back,” Pearce says. “But Scott Saxon, manager of B.B. Mann, has graciously agreed to discount our usage fee to help cover those expenses.”

Still, arts groups say they’re doing what they can to stay afloat. And many are hopeful they’ll be able to stick around until next season.

“Absolutely,” says Amy Ginsburg, executive director of Southwest Florida Symphony. “We will survive this. ... We’ll be back — if not this year, but next year for sure.”

Southwest Florida Symphony lost money from its planned performances at Mann Hall, including a May collaboration with pop star Ben Folds (to be rescheduled). But it could have been worse, Ginsburg says.

Mann Hall management decided to close the hall for several weeks, so the symphony didn’t have to pay the cost of renting the venue. And the symphony’s musicians are paid by the performance, so the orchestra didn’t lose money from that (although leaders are looking into ways to help them out financially).

Ginsburg hopes to return to performing again by late May — if Mann Hall re-opens by then. “If that’s not open, than that’s that,” she says. “Our fingers are crossed.”

Meanwhile, many groups are asking people to donate the cost of their previously purchased show tickets or to replace them with a gift certificate or a ticket to a future show. Others are taking to Facebook Live for fundraising events such as Florida Rep’s online gala Saturday.

Kensler says she was surprised at the number of people who decided to donate the cost of their tickets to New Phoenix Theatre. She’s been writing personal thank-you notes to every one of them.

“That was rather incredible to me,” she says. “Because they don’t know where the future lies. I don’t know where MINE lies, and I don’t know where the theater’s lies.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I do know that we’ve been appreciated. And that’s pretty cool.”

Even so, Kensler has mixed feelings about doing fundraisers during the coronavirus pandemic. Yes, her theater needs the money — badly. But many people are out of work and can’t afford to donate.

“I know the arts are important,” she says. “But people are worried about feeding their kids.”