

A Pandemic First: Actors' Union Will Allow Two Shows, With Testing

Theaters in the Berkshires are planning live shows, “Godspell” and “Harry Clarke,” with limited audiences and virus-related protocols in place. One will be indoors, and one outdoors.



Nicholas Edwards, shown here in a production of “Unmasked,” will star as Jesus in the Berkshire Theater Group production of “Godspell.” Matthew Murphy



By Michael Paulson

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For the first time since the coronavirus pandemic erupted, [Actors' Equity](#) is agreeing to allow a few of its members to perform onstage.

The union, which represents 51,000 actors and stage managers around the country, said it had given the green light to two summer shows in the Berkshires region of Western Massachusetts: an outdoor production of the musical “[Godspell](#),” and an indoor production of the solo show “[Harry Clarke](#).”

In recent weeks, multiple theaters featuring nonunion actors have begun [resuming performances](#) — in some cases outdoors, and in almost all cases with social distancing — and a group of Equity actors collectively developed an outdoor performance piece in New York’s Hudson Valley. And, of course, many actors have been performing online.

But “Godspell” and “Harry Clarke,” both scheduled to begin in early August in Pittsfield, Mass., are now likely to be the first productions in which union actors will perform in person before paying audiences in the United States since the threat of infection prompted Broadway and the nation’s regional theaters to shut down in mid-March. Citing safety concerns, Equity had [barred its members](#) from in-person auditions, rehearsals and performances.

“We’re not trying to stop people from doing theater, but we are trying to stop people from getting sick and/or dying,” said Kate Shindle, the president of Actors’ Equity. She called the decision to allow these two productions “very exciting, and also something to watch very closely.”

“The fact that there is going to be Equity-approved theater this summer is something that I really wasn’t sure was going to be able to happen,” she added.

At both productions, performers and stage managers will be regularly tested for the coronavirus, and audience members will have to wear masks. The infection rate in Western Massachusetts is low, and both theaters were willing to accommodate the union’s safety requirements.

Mary McColl, the union’s executive director, said she is in conversation with about 70 producers around the country seeking to resume performances by fall. But, she said, no other approvals are imminent, because “as we’ve been working through the protocols that would be necessary, everything started to go crazy in a lot of these states. We’re not in control of the virus, and neither are these producers.”

“Godspell,” a beloved and oft-performed 1971 musical by Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelak, is to be staged by the [Berkshire Theater Group](#) for a month beginning Aug. 6. The musical, adapted from the Gospel of Matthew and exploring biblical parables, will have a 10-person cast led by [Nicholas Edwards](#) as Jesus; it will be set in 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic.

Kate Maguire, the artistic director and chief executive of the Berkshire Theater Group, said the production, directed by Alan Filderman, would be staged in a tent erected in a parking area; she said the tent would have about 100 socially distanced seats, vastly smaller than the 700-seat capacity of her indoor main stage.

The cast will isolate together in a house, and will be regularly tested for the coronavirus, she said. And the production, although fully staged with sets and costumes, will include no physical contact between actors — there will even be a contactless crucifixion, she said.

“We’ve never done ‘Godspell,’ but it was the one show I thought could make sense in this world,” Maguire said. “I’m kind of dying to hear ‘Save the People.’”

McColl said the “Godspell” approval was particularly significant because singing is considered a potential source of virus transmission. She said the actors would be distant from one another and would sing past one another during the production.



David Cale, who wrote the one-man play “Harry Clarke,” which will be staged at Barrington Stage Company. Cole Barash for The New York Times

“Harry Clarke,” a one-man play by David Cale, is about an ingratiating con artist, who will be played at [Barrington Stage Company](#) by [Mark H. Dold](#). The play, scheduled to have a two-week run starting Aug. 5, will be staged inside a 520-seat theater; to enable social distancing, only 163 people will be allowed to attend each performance, and Dold will perform upstage, far from the audience. The audience will undergo temperature checks, and will have to follow rules about how to enter and exit the theater to reduce crowding.

Barrington Stage says it will have an entirely digital experience — no physical tickets or programs. The theater has also reconfigured its air-conditioning system to increase the circulation of fresh air.

Both Maguire and the artistic director at Barrington, Julianne Boyd, said they could not make peace with a summer without live performance in the Berkshires, a region whose economy relies heavily on cultural tourism.

“I am acutely aware of the responsibility that we’re taking on — Berkshire County has been really healthy the past several weeks, and I know we need to keep it that way,” Maguire said. “Also, every mothering instinct that I have is coming out for these actors. But I felt like with ‘Godspell’ we could do this and keep everyone safe.”

Boyd, who has been working to get permission to proceed for two months, was also determined. She is also planning an outdoor cabaret in a park in August, and hoping to stage several other one-performer indoor performances.

“People need live theater,” she said. “Let’s face it: art has healing powers, and I want to start that healing process safely and responsibly.”

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](#)

