

WE'LL BE BACK!

1/1/21

The Kate endures pandemic with namesake's feisty spirit

By Lisa Reisman

1/1/21

When the pandemic lowered the curtain on the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center back in March, those working behind the scenes adopted a spirited can-do attitude reminiscent of its namesake.

Evening after evening saw none of the 45,000 patrons filling the 260 seats of the historic theater, from celebrated tenor Placido Domingo from *The Met* in HD, to five-time Grammy winner, bluegrass-playing, "Hillbilly Rock" superstar Marty Stuart, to a musical retelling of the *Pirates of Penzance*.

The rafters no longer shook with the goosebump-inducing vibrato of gospel icon Darlene Love. The air vibrating with Jethro Tull legend Martin Barre shredding guitar solos into oblivion was only a memory, as were the floors echoing with patrons foot-tapping to the up-tempo swing of the world-renowned Whiffenpoofs.

Put on hold was the CPTV series, featuring the ethereal jazz stylings of Kandace Springs, the standards of celebrated singer-songwriter Rosanne Cash, and the gleeful tunes of the Wood Brothers "connecting



Steph Feltzer / Contributed photo



Nick Sorrell / Contributed photo

Multi-instrumentalist Sheila E at The Kate in May 2019. The pandemic put the CPTV series, featuring the ethereal jazz stylings of Kandace Springs, at left, on hold.

the disconnected parts of us," as Oliver Wood put it.

"Arts venues, where patrons sit shoulder-to-shoulder to be inspired and entertained, are about the worst kind of places in a pandemic, so it's been a challenge to say the least," The Kate Executive Director Brett Elliott said.

"But through it all, we've kept working. We've always been really dedicated to production quality, lighting, and sound, so we relocated our tech booth from the balcony to the first floor which added 20 seats."

They also secured a \$111,300 grant from the state as a nonprofit arts organization that, Elliott said, "is a great help to keeping staff employed and making reopening preparations." They were awarded another to fund an upcoming online exhibit comprised of letters donated by the family of Katharine Hepburn's sister Marion.

"The letters were written by Katharine Hepburn to her mother at the beginning of her career," Elliott said. "You can really hear her voice coming through."

One piece of programming that went forward despite the pandemic was Kate's Camp for Kids.

"Education is a huge part of what we do and the next generation, bringing the

See *The Kate* on A6

THE KATE

From page A1

arts to them, is so important," Elliott said. "We had 100 kids attend over five weeks and we figured out a way to keep those kids safe."

Something else that persists is the tight-knit nature of the staff and volunteers, according to volunteer coordinator Shirley Colquhoun.

"We showcase one volunteer every Tuesday on social media," she said. "It's so interesting to hear why they volunteer and what they miss about it. I think the common thread is it's just a special, magical place."

There have been frustrations along the way. Phase 3, which allowed music and theater venues to reopen with limited capacity in early October, lasted only a handful of weeks.

"That wasn't nearly enough time for the runway needed for an arts organization like The Kate to book the appropriate shows and sell tickets," Elliott said.

Performing artists have been another casualty of the pandemic. "We want our artists to get paid, and that's another challenging part of this whole thing is that nobody's touring with the travel restrictions."

The Kate has offered virtual programming that included, in December, holiday features like the Blind Boys of Alabama Christmas Show, Cherish the Ladies live from Ireland, and legendary trumpeter Herb Alpert.

"They're all great performers, but it's a temporary substitute," Elliott said. "A virtual concert just becomes tomorrow's YouTube video: forever there, easily forgotten."

"The magic of The Kate is the intimacy of the live performances and the production quality that we bring forth in that room."

Board of Trustee Carter Gowrie, who's performed on the stage for the last five years as part of Carter Gowrie & Friends at the annual Black Friday benefit for the Shoreline Kitchens & Pantries, sounded a similar refrain.

**"Through it all,
we've kept working.
We've always been
really dedicated..."**

The Kate Executive Director Brett Elliott

"It already a very intimate theater, and with the upgrades in the sound and lights, it's that much better," he said. "It's a jewel."

Elliott said that The Kate has been screening some films, as well as the Bolshoi Ballet and the Nutcracker and Magic Flute from The Met in HD. In November, it staged a comedy show.

"We had 40 to 50 people, mostly in clusters of two, socially distanced," he said. "Everyone was very forgiving of the oddity that no one was sitting around you, but boy it feels different."

Then again, "it's not perfect, but it's something."

Old Saybrook First Selectman Carl Fortuna agreed. "The bad news is they're down 99 percent," he said. "The good news is that Brett and his crew did a great job during this difficult time raising money and making improvements. They've turned lemons into lemonade."

The Kate's "unqualified success has been a lifeblood for restaurants and retail on Main Street virtually since its inception in 2009," he said. "We can't wait for it to reopen stronger than ever."

Elliott agreed. "No one's going anywhere," he said. "We'll be back."

In the meantime, he's asking those looking for a way to support The Kate to consider purchasing a ticket to a future event or maybe a gift card, "so we all have something to look forward to," he said.

"Katharine Hepburn said, 'Life is going to be difficult, and dreadful things will happen. What you do is move along, go on with it, and be tough.' We're taking her advice."

► For more information on The Kate, visit <https://www.katharinehepburn-theater.org>.

► To support The Kate, visit <https://www.katharinehepburntheater.org/support>.