

## **Theater in the New Era of Covid and Zoom: A conversation with Theatre Palisades' newly-elected Board President, Phil Bartolf**

Behind the scenes of many a theater company is its board of directors. While the pandemic marches on in the foreground, in the background Theatre Palisades' Board of Directors has continued to look after the company's needs.

Recently the board elected a new President, Philip Bartolf, who is also a longtime actor with the company. Fellow Theatre Palisades actor, board member, Chair of the Audience Development Committee Mitch Feinstein sat down with Phil to talk about theater in the time of Covid-19, and how Theatre Palisades plans to move forward.

**Mitch:** Phil, how have you personally been dealing with Covid isolation and your desire to act and be creative?

**Phil:** From an act-and-be-creative standpoint, happily the main acting class that I take, which is an Alexander technique class, went on to Zoom immediately. So, I've had that to look forward to every week.

I've been regularly looking at the audition notices in *Backstage*, which have all been for Zoom-based performances. Recently I was cast in a show that involved a month's worth of rehearsing and performing over not-many-dates in that short time span.

It was such a pleasure, working with a script, developing character, the whole bit, and it was a fascinating subject: about this world renowned art forger in Holland who operated during the war. And he was charged with treason because when the allied soldiers found Goering's looted-art stash, there was a Vermeer that was traced back to him — and selling a national treasure was immediately subject to capital punishment — and his defense was: "I forged it!"

**Mitch:** Do you think that those experiences will help you handle the challenges facing Theatre Palisades in the time of Covid?

**Phil:** Yes! As this recent Zoom theater experience showed me, and as well as what Theatre Palisades Youth just produced this month, we are seeing that online is a very viable performance platform, and we want to take advantage of it to put up pieces, if not whole-plays, that feature actors either from our troupe or from a general audition call. I also look forward to working closely with Diane Grant and the New Playwrights festival people to bring in new works from our local community that we can put up.

This is an opportunity. We've talked about putting up a local playwright's piece during the main stage season, which we've only done once before. And I see us as having that opportunity now.

**Mitch:** In light of that, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of Theater Palisades?

**Phil:** The weaknesses right now: Quite frankly, we've been slow to get off the dime in using Zoom for performance-based pieces beyond a few individual pieces that we've put up on our YouTube channel. But what Theatre Palisades Youth just did with their Sound of Music Zoom-sical, we need to now bring that to the adult side. Our colleagues at Morgan Wixson, and at Long Beach are doing this. Long Beach Shakespeare Company just did Oscar Wilde's *Woman of No Importance*. We need to start moving in that direction more aggressively than we have.

**Mitch:** How do you see implementing those kinds of productions at Theater Palisades?

**Phil:** Well, we can tap our Theatre Palisades Actors' Troupe, and we can also do an open call. Like how I got into this play, it was with a theater company in New York, but you know, four of us in the cast were here in Los Angeles. And Zoom gives one an enormous range of flexibility to bring people "into the theater" through the screen. We may make a few mistakes going forward with this, but it will be lessons well learned, and even have value into the future. Because, after we reopen, I think Zoom is going to maintain itself as a viable performance platform.

**Mitch:** Do you think the COVID epidemic has permanently changed the theatrical productions? And if yes, how will things change and how will Theatre Palisades be able to address those changes?

**Phil:** It's funny you mentioned this because (board member) Susan Stangl and I were just corresponding on this subject the other day. And you know, being the historian that I am, I am hopeful that what we'll find is — as happened with the Elizabethans and Jacobean once the Puritans and the city authorities reopened the playhouses, they were thronged with audiences desperate for the experience of being there in a theatrical space to watch a theatrical performance.

So I'm hoping that maybe after we open our doors, even though there might be some reluctance OF people to come back into the theater, we will find that that reluctance goes away pretty fast, and we will again, enjoy hosting audiences inside Pierson Playhouse.

**Mitch:** Sounds good! Speaking of that, has the board been working on a plan how to deal with all of the issues of reopening and safety and so forth? And if so, what kinds of actions can we look forward to seeing?

**Phil:** I have a to-do list and that's one of the things we need to do is to start our reopening plans and put together the steps that we will be taking to ready the theater to receive people, and then have something in place that, on a performance day or performance night, these will be the steps that have to be taken to make the theater safe and healthy for our patrons before they come in. As well as the steps that have to be taken to reestablish cleanliness and healthiness once they leave. And you know, this is going to be fairly complicated until there is a widely used viable vaccine. Social distancing is going to be necessary, and that also applies to what goes on, on the stage.

Social distancing, is in itself going to affect what we are able to put up. We can't do big cast theater pieces. I'm not sure we could do *Twelfth Night* again, for example, which had a cast of 12. And we certainly couldn't do the finale of that play because you can't maintain six feet separation among the performers in that scene. So we will have to look at smaller pieces, two to six people and not involving a lot of fight choreography or affection choreography. You know, a perfect musical right now would be *Waiting for Godot*, if there is such a musical.

**Mitch:** Have you had any thoughts or ideas about the necessity in this environment to draw in new and diverse audiences to keep the theater going? And if so, do you have any ideas about how to do that?

**Phil:** I do firmly believe that theaters need to be more concrete in the steps they take to attract a diverse audience regardless of what their immediate demographic makeup may be. And in this regard I just sat in on a webinar that Morgan Wixson put on the other night, dealing with this very subject, specifically addressing how to develop a rapport with the theatrical community of people of color and attract them to work with your theater in whichever capacity, on the board, as a director, as a producer, as a performer. It was very, very informative. The panel included Mark Antonio Pritchett who Theatre Palisades fans might recall was our fight choreographer and Assistant Director for *Twelfth Night*, and then he directed a wonderfully received production of *The Mousetrap*.

The reality is, our theater company does need to find ways to broaden our scope both in the shows, and in its audience. Now, this is another attractive feature of Zoom, because with online performances, we're not waiting for people to come through the door. Arguably we can broadcast to a wider audience, maybe attract more viewership as time goes by, and see about achieving more diversity that way.

**Mitch:** Wonderful! Do you have any final thoughts?

**Phil:** Well, I'm looking forward to the chance to work with everybody in my role as President, to help re-open Theater Palisades as a theater known and respected for its outstanding productions.

**Mitch:** I would like to close by saying that we want to acknowledge the great job Nona Hale has done for Theatre Palisades all these years in her tenure as President! And on behalf of our community, actors, board members, and patrons, I want to say, "Phil, Thank you and good luck! We're looking forward to seeing what you do!"