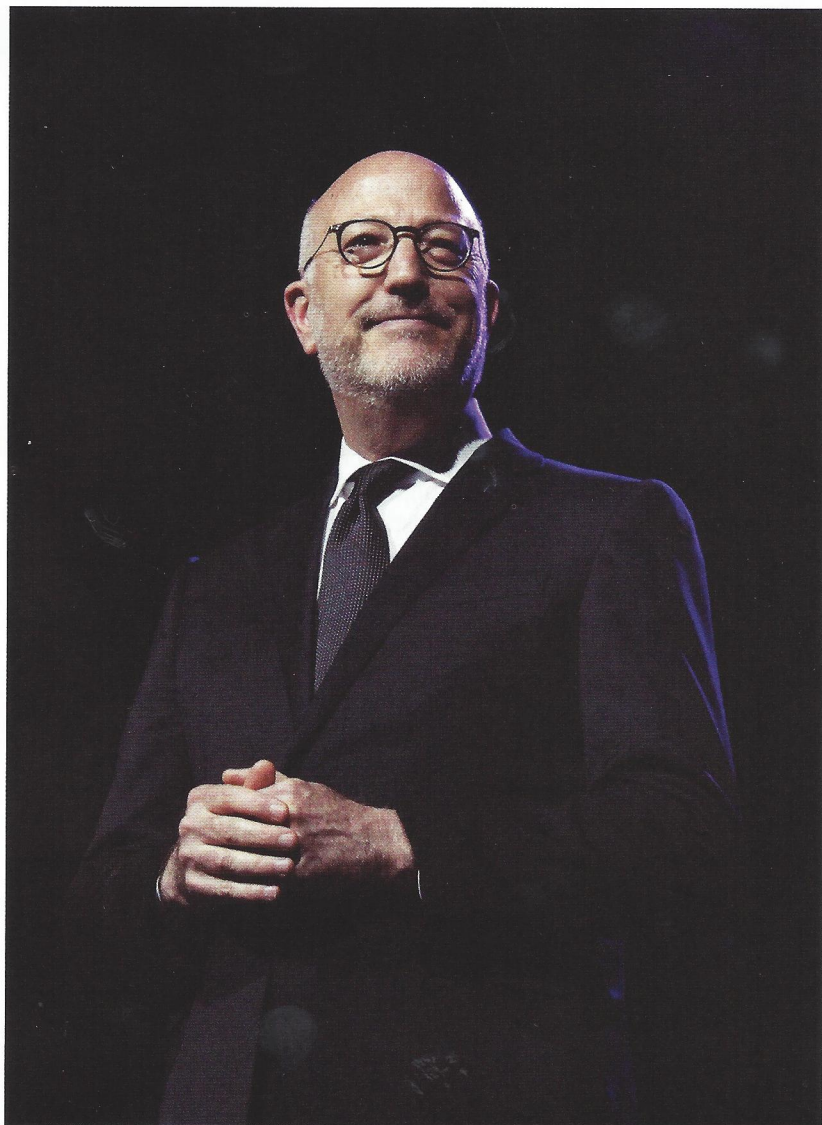


# After intermission

BLUMENTHAL PERFORMING ARTS CEO TOM GABBARD REVEALS HOW CHARLOTTE'S LARGEST ARTS ORGANIZATION IS PLANNING BROADWAY'S RETURN TO LOCAL STAGES.

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER



**Z**oom-meeting maestro wasn't a role Tom Gabbard aspired to over the last few months. The Blumenthal Performing Arts president and CEO spends far too much of his time these days on the online meeting platform working with colleagues all over the country — and across the pond in Europe and Asia — while planning for the safe return of Broadway to Charlotte.

In the era of coronavirus, Gabbard and other executives in the live-entertainment business have been forced to navigate ever-changing state and municipal health and safety guidelines; dizzying logistics of touring show scheduling and resource allocation; huge volunteer and paid staff communications and morale; a loyal and curious group of subscribers and patrons; and 101 nagging details that shift as frequently as offensive sets at a Panthers' game.

Gabbard takes it all in stride. He's led the nonprofit arts organization since 2003. BPA holds long-term management contracts with the city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County to operate the Belk, Booth, Stage Door and Knight theaters, as well as Spirit Square's McGlohon and Duke Energy theaters.

*SouthPark* sat down with Gabbard in late June to discuss what the city can expect regarding the return of live entertainment, best practices across the globe for safely attending the theater, and his personal experience battling the virus.

*Comments have been edited for length and clarity.*

## **Describe the early stages of shutdown for Blumenthal Performing Arts.**

We started canceling performances in the second week of March. As of now, 291 performances have been canceled. We quickly pivoted our staff to working from home. That's one of the real suc-



cess stories here — we had made a real investment putting in a new phone system and other things. Our customer-service activities, particularly the people who answer the phones to sell tickets [and] answer questions, all those folks were seamlessly able to move offsite and work from home. Because you can imagine, even though we haven't been selling a lot of tickets, we've had a lot of questions to answer.

All touring stopped. Broadway shows, concerts, everything very quickly came to a halt. Once Broadway shut down, that sent a strong message across the country.

#### **What does reopening look like, specifically for Broadway?**

When it comes to these tours, the logistics are complicated, and they require the cities be booked somewhat continuously. ... It's a complex puzzle to figure out those schedules.

The strategy we've been working on is to try to get touring productions started first. New York is largely a tourist market. Tourism is going to be down in a big way, especially international tourism. Those shows have a much more daunting challenge than on the road, where we have season-ticket holders, we have a financial base to make these shows viable.

#### **What have you learned in terms of best practices for theatergoers? What might local patrons expect when coming back?**

Uniquely, we did find that the theater business does have a model that gives us some inspiration from Seoul, South Korea. There, big musicals like *Phantom of the Opera* have played throughout the pandemic. Andrew Lloyd Webber is so impressed with it that his flagship theater in London, the Palladium, is introducing many of their techniques.

Among the takeaways we learned are universal masking is a key element. Masking is required of everybody, including the musicians in the pit unless they play a wind instrument. [Everyone goes] through two different temperature checks as they enter the lobby, and they fill out a questionnaire in advance. The theater twice a week has a medical-grade cleaning. People don't eat and drink

in the theater like they do here. There are hand sanitizers everywhere. They essentially quarantine the backstage area, and they tightly control who gets back there.

We asked our ticket buyers, "What are the things you need to see to feel safe?" A majority have told us that they need to see a mask requirement, and we need to be serious about it. People should expect that there will be a mask requirement, one we take seriously.

Ultimately, returning will be subject to government approval in the states where these shows will emerge. It will also be subject to having safety protocols that reassure the unions representing actors, musicians, stagehands, staff and patrons.

#### **You and your wife both had the virus, how are you doing?**

Vicki and I were over in the [United Kingdom] for a week (in March). I'm very certain that when we were in London or Manchester or traveling between there, that's where we picked it up. I started with a fever and aches and pains. I fortunately didn't have some of the effects that other people have had. It was just an uncomfortable three or four days with flu and [fever]. We're fine and fully recovered.

#### **What do you want Charlotte patrons to know about the future of theater?**

We are working hard to get back. We want to get back safely. We know the kinds of things we do to bring people together are important to our community. We also introduced, and I think we're the only theater in the country to have, a COVID guarantee.

We're eager to get back in the game as soon as we can. Rest assured, we're going to do it safely. **SP**

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Blumenthal's COVID guarantee: For tickets purchased before Sept. 1, Blumenthal Performing Arts will allow ticket holders for performances through August 2021 to exchange tickets for another show or receive a refund if they don't feel safe attending.