

# Schoolhouse Arts Center



## Press Release

### For Immediate Release

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### **Schoolhouse Struggles into 2021 under COVID**

Schoolhouse Arts Center, like most small businesses, has spent the past year trying to survive the restrictions of the Corona Virus pandemic. But it has been especially hard for Schoolhouse because non-profits generally have little or no reserves to carry them through a normal year, much less the crushing restrictions made necessary to control a pandemic.

Schoolhouse Arts Center was established in 1988 by retired Broadway director Hank Beebe of Portland. For 32 years it has brought the enjoyment and experience of live theater to the Sebago Lakes region. It provides youngsters and adults with the opportunity to develop new skills in live performances for their friends and neighbors. Schoolhouse has been a fixture in Standish through good times and bad. It has endured economic recessions and bad times unscathed. But 2020 and the COVID pandemic have brought Schoolhouse to its knees.

Ten months ago, Schoolhouse was ready to present its first show of the 2020 season and was in rehearsals for their Spring show. Both were abruptly cancelled when COVID barged onto the scene. All plans for 2020 were promptly shelved. Young actors who had been preparing for months were told that the show would not go on just days before opening night. Directors, actors, and crews were informed that rehearsals were cancelled. Costumes were returned to storage. Scripts that had been purchased were boxed up and put on the shelf. Fees that had been paid for the rights to present numerous plays in 2020 were credited against future productions. Half-completed sets still lay unfinished on the stage. And the expectations and excitement of everyone involved in upcoming performances were dashed. All productions for the year were cancelled and the few paid Schoolhouse staff members were furloughed. The only live activity that remained on the Schoolhouse calendar were two children's camps

planned for last August. Even those had to be reduced in size and made COVID compliant. Those changes and reductions in size meant that even the Schoolhouse education program was of little help in covering ongoing costs.

Like many small businesses, Schoolhouse had to close its doors for the entire 2020 season. But the expenses involved in maintaining their hundred year old building continued relentlessly. Mortgage payments, heat, electrical, telephone, internet, trash removal, and many other overhead costs continued even though their customary sources of income had been severed. Small reserves were quickly depleted. A small grant was received from the Maine Arts Commission but it too could not stop the financial hemorrhaging that Schoolhouse was suffering. Loan payments were temporarily renegotiated. Many utilities were cancelled to reduce the financial losses. All those measures helped Schoolhouse to survive the Summer and Autumn months. But winter is the time when Schoolhouse, like everyone in Maine, endures the high costs of winter. The cost of heating the old Schoolhouse building is generally seven to ten thousand dollars per winter. Plowing their driveway and parking areas is hundreds of dollars per storm. Their old building was closed all year but cutting off the heat in winter is not possible. Sprinkler systems would freeze and equipment would be damaged. Teams of volunteers worked in the old building to seal doors and window and cover them with heavy insulated materials. Technical equipment was moved to a more reliable locations. Thermostats were turned down to a minimum and the old building was shut tight for the winter. Fire regulations require that the driveway be plowed to permit emergency access. But efforts to find someone willing to plow for free or reduced rates has been challenging. Attempts to fundraise with an online cabaret proved to be a lot of work for very little return. A Go-Fund-Me campaign was instituted and promoted on Facebook and Twitter by Board President Cristina McBreairty of Gorham. A link can be found on the Schoolhouse web site at [www.schoolhousearts.org](http://www.schoolhousearts.org). That effort and donations from Schoolhouse patrons have helped keep the Schoolhouse from floundering on a sea of COVID misfortune. But Schoolhouse's survival is a month-to-month struggle. But Schoolhouse's survival is a month-to-month struggle.

Schoolhouse has made it halfway through the winter. But fortunes are still bleak. Yet in the true theater tradition, their Artistic Director Zac Stearn remains undaunted. He and the Schoolhouse Board of Governors remain cautiously optimistic that somehow Schoolhouse will survive. Stearn is in the process of developing a limited slate of shows for 2021. "The biggest issues facing us are that even if we manage to survive the winter, we have no startup money to buy scripts, build sets, make our theater COVID compliant." says Stearn, "And our schedule needs to be very flexible because we have no idea what the COVID restrictions are going to be later in 2021." So, Schoolhouse has established a shortened theater season that can change as the requirements of the pandemic evolve.

The Schoolhouse theater season usually begins in February or March and continues through December. This schedule means that auditions and rehearsals would normally start in December or January. But the costs of their building in cold weather demand a reduced schedule. So, in 2021 Stearn expects to stage their first in-house performance in May and may close the theater by October 1. "Usually we have long periods between productions when we are building sets, rehearsing the next show, and preparing costumes." says Stearn. "But a shorter season means a much tighter schedule. We will start out with a few virtual online productions. But we plan to present one show per month from June through September. This will mean shorter rehearsal schedules and much more intense preparation." Schoolhouse

shows usually have rehearsal for 6 to 8 weeks while all the other preparations are made. Stearn plans to condense those activities into 3 weeks. "This will demand much greater focus and commitment from our cast of volunteer actors and the supporting crew," explains Stearn. "It is the only way that Schoolhouse can survive."

Stearn and the Schoolhouse Board are hopeful that the Maine CDC requirements will allow them to perform plays in their main indoor theater which normally seats about 150 people. "We expect that COVID restrictions will require us to modify seating to support social distancing", explains Stearn. "So, Plan A assumes that we may be able to accommodate audiences of 50 to 75 patrons at each performance. We know that there will be restrictions for the cast and lots of sanitation requirements as well. We are planning for social distancing in the theater, one-way traffic patterns, and tickets that accommodate limited seating." But Stearn is also working on other plans just in case the COVID restrictions become more stringent. These include the possibility of moving performances outdoors or doing virtual performances using internet tools such as Zoom to enable audiences to view plays on their computers.

"Schoolhouse cannot endure another year of closure," says Board President Cristina McBreaity. "The only way that we can continue to serve our community during COVID is to be flexible as the pandemic demands. But we must ensure that our patron, cast, and crew are safe."

Stearn explained that the slate of shows for 2021 is not yet complete. But the tentative list starts with *The Show Must Go On - Livestream* presented online on Friday Jan. 29 at 7:00 by the Schoolhouse teen group, The Black Box Teens. Lots of very talented young people will perform and there will be raffles for free tickets to Schoolhouse performances later in the year. Find a link to their free online show at [www.Schoolhousearts.org](http://www.Schoolhousearts.org) or on Facebook. Stearn is planning a monthly series of virtual online workshops on a variety of theater-related topics to start in March. In May the Black Box Teens will return with an in-house performance of the *Truly Talented Kids*. This is an annual favorite fully produced and performed by the Schoolhouse teen-agers. This show has been performed annually for 4 years and is a great opportunity for their young performers to gain experience on the stage as well as behind the scenes. In June Schoolhouse is planning to perform their first major show ... *High School Musical Jr.* In July the Schoolhouse plans to present a great summer musical but decisions still need to be made about the specific show. You can be sure it will be filled with uplifting music and dance numbers. August will see Schoolhouse offering theater classes for kids once again in a fully COVID compliant environment. It will be climaxed by a kids performance of Disney's *Little Mermaid*. This will be a long-awaited chance for our young students to get up on stage and experience performing before an audience. Classes held last summer were unable to do a stage performance because of the Corona Virus limitations. It is bound to be an exciting experience for these young thespians. Schoolhouse plans to present *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* in late September, right before the Halloween season. Whether the Schoolhouse season goes beyond September is still under discussion and will be determined by the progress of COVID conditions and the financial status of Schoolhouse at that time.

"If Schoolhouse can survive the expenses of Winter, our survival in 2021 will depend on flexibility," says Stearn. "If we continue to produce great entertainment, our patrons will be anxious to get out of the house and attend live theater." The pandemic has nearly brought an end to Schoolhouse Arts Center. But they remain cautiously optimistic that the community will support them and enable them to survive COVID stronger than ever. Schoolhouse Arts Center

is located at 16 Richville Road (Route 114) in Standish, just north of the intersection of Route 114 and Route 35, only 7 miles northwest of Gorham center or North Windham. Follow their upcoming performances on Facebook or make donations to their Go-Fund-Me program at [www.schoolhousearts.org](http://www.schoolhousearts.org).

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