

Signs of a rebound at Hartford venues

Early signs of rebound at Hartford entertainment venues. But how long will it take to fill those sets again? But how long will it take to fill those seats again?



Hartford Stage Co. was founded in 1964 and moved to its present location, shown here, on Church Street in 1968. [courant file photos](#)





Laura Manasewich, local comedian and improv fanatic from East Hartford, performs at Sea Tea Improv in Hartford in 2019.

BY KENNETH R. GOSSELIN | HARTFORD COURANT

A reluctance to attend live shows appears to be easing a bit this spring in Hartford as the pandemic winds down, but the push to coax people off their couches and away from the television still has months, possibly even a year or more, ahead of it.

Even so, at Sea Tea Improv, downtown's underground comedy club, and other venues around the city, there are encouraging signs of audiences again lining up for tickets.

"I was very scared until around Christmas," Sea Tea founder and managing director Julia Pistell said. "And then in January — it was always our busy month anyway — but all of a sudden — it really felt like all of a sudden — people felt like 'I am done.' So we just had a big influx in January and it has sustained for these few months. So. I'm feeling pretty positive right now."

Before the pandemic, Sea Tea, whose actors draw their improvisations from the audience, typically saw crowds of 40-50 a show at their 80-seat venue on Asylum Street. The turnout fell to as low as 10% or 20% of that typical attendance, but in recent weeks, it has climbed to an average of 60%, Pistell said.

"Which is obviously not amazing, but it's also not what it was, which was much, much worse," Pistell said.

The spread of COVID-19 in early 2020 was swiftly followed by the forced closure of stores, restaurants, arts and entertainment venues in Connecticut, touching off a dramatic cultural shift that made the home the central focus of life and work. Once the state's closure orders were lifted, many employers in the hospitality and entertainment industry found themselves financially stretched and hamstrung by the loss of workers.

Infinity Music Hall Hartford, the concert and comedy venue in the city's Front Street entertainment district, was closed for 18 months, and its owners had to seriously consider whether they would be able to reopen the concert hall. Infinity Hall had been hailed as an anchor for the Front Street area when it first opened in 2014 and a major boost for the city's nightlife.

GoodWorks Entertainment had purchased Infinity Hall Hartford and its sister location in Norfolk in 2019, just months before the pandemic struck. One of GoodWorks' founders, Dave Rosenfeld, said the survival of the Infinity Hall rested exclusively on two federal stimulus programs, one being the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant.

"Without that, we never would have made it," Rosenfeld said.

The outlook for two-level Infinity Hall is more upbeat today. So far this year, ticket sales to shows have reached pre-pandemic levels, typically ranging from 250-300 for each show. What has yet to return, however, is the number of shows at Infinity. Now, there are eight a month and before the pandemic, the shows averaged 10 in Hartford, a number that is likely attainable in 2023 "so we're really ramping up, Rosenfeld said.

"Our view of the world is reflected in ticket sales," Rosenfeld said. "There's definitely a pickup, and that's an indication of activity in the town."

Two weeks ago, Infinity Hall sold 715 tickets to Dark Star Orchestra, a Grateful Dead cover band, Rosenfeld said.

"And that was on a Monday," Rosenfeld said. "So then, that tells you something right there."

'Building the city'

Few would argue that attendance at shows and events in Hartford is still in the early stages of recovery, and there is still uncertainty about its trajectory.

The issue was very much on the mind of Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin last week when he urged businesses at a MetroHartford Alliance meeting to bring as many of their workers back to downtown offices as possible. The effort doesn't even have to be full-time, Bronin said, and could be as simple as altering hybrid work schedules, increasing by a day to three days a week in the office, Bronin said.

Bronin has his eye on the broader goal of reigniting the momentum behind the city's revitalization that was derailed by the pandemic. More workers in the city means more business for restaurants and, after hours: bars, entertainment venues and theaters.

Employers face the challenge of employees who want to work remotely, within a tight labor market where companies are competing for the most top-notch talent. That gives prospective employees the upper hand in negotiating terms of employment.

Bronin did not limit his urging to come back to the city to the work week at last week's meeting of the alliance, the region's chamber of commerce, at downtown's Dunkin' Park.

"We really need everyone in this room to be engaged in the work of building the city," Bronin said. "It means as an individual coming out to dinner more often in the city, going out to the Yard Goats games, going over the Hartford Athletic soccer games ... spreading the word in your communities about all the things there are to do in Hartford. Going over to the Wadsworth, going to our theaters, if you haven't been to the theater in a little while."

Even as the pandemic wanes, the challenge will remain in convincing the public to resume the pattern of activities it pursued three years ago. That will mean moving away from a more enclosed existence at home, so vital in the thick of the pandemic — with television and perhaps streaming services, as the center of entertainment.

"I love watching television shows, but I also know that going to a live experience is a completely different and rewarding thing that, I believe, people will find rewarding: Put down your phone, get out of your house, go do something with your friends," Cynthia Rider, managing director of Hartford Stage Co., said. "We do crave that. We've just gotten out of the habit of doing that."

Hartford Stage is still struggling to bring people back to its 490-seat theater on Church Street, an issue faced by live performance theaters across the country. Subscription packages for multiple plays, a key driver of revenue, Rider said, are still down by more than 50% compared with before the pandemic.

One key indicator of ticket sale strength is the purchase of single tickets that are outside of subscription packages, Rider said.

So far, this season, Hartford Stage has sold 9,578 individual tickets and is on a pace to surpass last year's total of 9,940. But that is still far below pre-pandemic individual ticket sales of 21,789 in the 2018/ 2019 season.

Rider said she has high hopes for the two remaining shows this season: Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind*.

Corporate bookings lag

On Hartford riverfront, the massive Connecticut Convention Center saw a rebound in shows open to the public, driven by two events in particular, the *Beyond Van Gogh* exhibit and the holiday light show *Glow*. Together, two events drew about 120,000 visitors.

Another bright spot was the annual Connecticut Flower and Garden show that drew 27,000 over four days in late February, 2,000 more than in 2019, prior to the pandemic.

While the numbers are impressive on their face, convention center officials say conventions and corporate events are still behind bookings before the pandemic. The public shows are certainly important to the city because they bring people to the city who often patronize restaurants in the city. But the multi-day conventions and corporate bookings have even greater economic spin-off potentials for hotel stays and visits to other attractions in Hartford.

Convention center officials say one factor in the slow recovery in corporate events is that employers are still navigating the dramatic shift in the workplace environment that now includes a much greater emphasis on remote and hybrid options.

“Generally speaking, the public show business is back, and it’s safe to say that it’s back,” Mike Costelli, the convention center’s general manager, said. “The corporate market is still, I think, about a year away from really getting fully recovered.”

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