

Newsletter: The rise of the Delta variant threatens to derail theaters' best-laid plans

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By Jessica Gelt Staff Writer July 24, 2021 8 AM PT

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“Delta, Delta, Delta, can I help ya, help ya, help ya?”

I think of that old SNL skit about sorority sisters every time I hear the word “Delta,” which, these days, is pretty much all the time. It’s a bizarre bit of cognitive dissonance: something that used to make us hiccup with laughter is also the COVID-19 variant on the rise in L.A. County. Hot vax summer has turned into, as my colleague **Tracy Brown** tweeted, “hot masks summer,” and as numbers continue to soar, fear is growing among theater groups that audiences will hunker down at home once again.

I’m arts reporter **Jessica Gelt**, filling in for **Carolina Miranda**, who is visiting as many museums as possible on the East Coast while her hair fends off the ravages of high humidity. I’ll start this week’s Essential Arts report by relaying my conversations with L.A. theater leaders, whom I asked about contingency plans should Delta continue to spread in the region.

Pivot, pivot, pivot

Southern California's theater companies have been remarkably resilient throughout the pandemic. They have learned to navigate the county, state and federal whack-a-mole approach to virus mitigation, which required that they duck, dodge and pivot like a boxing champ to remain in compliance with public health regulations. And just when it seemed like California had rounded the bend into some sort of steady new normal, with the coronavirus down for the count, Delta pulled itself up off the mat.

The **Hollywood Fringe Festival**, which in a good year can feature more than 100 shows, was forced to cancel in 2020. This year Delta delayed ticket sales for a week while health and safety measures were worked out. Now audience members will need to show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of the show they wish to attend.

“Going to a nightclub or restaurant carries more risk than going to a show — yet those establishments have been open for months. Our theaters cannot remain closed without additional funding for much longer without suffering serious consequences,” wrote festival operations director **Lois Neville** in an email, adding that the festival is confident that its protocols will keep guests safe.

Independent producer and actor **Luke Walker** is starring in a show he wrote titled “**The Wake of Dick Johnson**,” which will stage its West Coast premiere at the Hollywood Fringe this year. He said he supports the ticket-sale delay and the additional health protocols, but the compressed timeframe in which to sell tickets — as well as the prevalence of Delta — is cause for anxiety.

“My personal concern is that fear of the new variant will deter people from attending. This festival means a great deal to many of us, and if we can't convince audiences to come, it could be devastating,” Walker said by email. “I've personally dedicated years of my life, many hardships, and my own personal savings into this production.”

Martha Demson, board president of the **Theatrical Producers League of Los Angeles**, an association for small and midsize nonprofit theaters, wrote in an email that the community she works with has begun discussing how to deal with the Delta surge.

Demson said certain theaters that were planning indoor productions for fall are considering canceling or postponing, others are pivoting to outdoors, and still others are waiting for more data and guidance before making a final decision.

There is also concern about breakthrough infections in fully vaccinated cast and crew, Demson said, adding that while such cases have not resulted in hospitalizations, “a significant number of our colleagues have nonetheless experienced nasty illness in July.”

“One reported COVID case on a show will shut it down for a considerable period, leading to significant financial losses,” she said. “And we are concerned about rising case numbers in both the vaccinated and unvaccinated communities in L.A. County. This may make a return to indoor performance much less attractive to our audiences.”

Theaters that Demson works with are waiting another week or two to see where the numbers go, and then they will likely release an audience survey.

Jean Davidson, president and chief executive of the **Los Angeles Master Chorale**, shared research conducted by Audience Outlook Monitor, an international organization that helps cultural groups decide when it’s feasible to resume programming. A key takeaway from a recent survey: “Attitudes about vaccinated-only admittance policies are increasingly favorable, with significant variation across markets; between 30% and 45% say they won’t go out unless proof or vaccine is required.”

L.A. Master Chorale, which will soon announce its 2021-22 season, is requiring its staff and artists to be vaccinated, and it’s requiring that audience members show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test for entrance to a concert.

Many of the organizations I surveyed said they are considering — or have already implemented — similar policies.

Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra will require proof of vaccination for all live events for the foreseeable future. The same is required of musicians, guest artists and staff.

The **Echo Theater Company**, which opens the world premiere of “Poor Clare” by Chiara Atik on Sept. 11 and the world premiere of “Ascension” by D.G. Watson on Sept. 23, reports that all staff, talent and crew will be fully vaccinated. It most likely will require proof of vaccination for audiences.

The **Geffen Playhouse**, which plans a return to in-person performances on Sept. 14 with “The Enigmatist,” is requiring vaccinations for all guests unless they are exempt for medical reasons or “sincerely held religious beliefs.” The latter will need a negative test within 72 hours for entrance.

The same language and requirements are being used by **L.A. Theatre Works**, which is planning to return to live performances at UCLA’s James Bridges Theater in mid-October.

The **Hollywood Pantages Theatre**, however, which plans to open “Hamilton” on Aug. 17, is not yet requiring vaccinations or negative COVID-19 tests. The theater said it has implemented safety measures including mobile ticketing, upgraded ventilation and hand sanitizing stations; it also has revised cleaning protocols and will require masks indoors at all times.

International City Theatre is in callbacks this week for its return to the stage with “Closely Related Keys” by Wendy Graf, scheduled to open Aug. 27. Artistic Director Caryn Desai said the production is operating in a large space that can accommodate socially distanced seating, and all guests must wear masks, but the company has yet to decide on a vaccine or testing requirement.

The Fountain Theater is grateful for its outdoor stage, which debuted in late June with a critically acclaimed production of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ play, “An Octoroon.” The theater has required every staff and company member to be vaccinated since May, Artistic Director Stephen Sachs said. When the outdoor theater debuted, masks were required, then on July 15, that mandate was lifted. Sachs said they are waiting to see how things trend before making a decision about whether to reimplement the policy.

“We have had in-house discussions about the possibility of requiring all patrons to be vaccinated. It may get to that point. We will do as the health experts direct us,” he wrote, adding that Delta is making the Fountain consider keeping its outdoor stage open to November, if evening weather allows.

In addition, he wrote, “We will be offering the use of our outdoor stage to theater companies who may be reluctant or unable to reopen their productions indoors because of safety concerns. We would be pleased to offer residencies in the fall to one or two companies who find opening at their own indoor theater impossible.”

L.A. Opera, which is set to begin its season with “Il Trovatore” on Sept. 18, said it will implement mandatory vaccination for all employees and artists effective Aug. 9, two days before rehearsals begin. Rules for the audience have yet to be determined.

Will Geer’s Theatricum Botanicum, which has the great good fortune of operating in a lush outdoor setting, nonetheless on July 17 decided to require masks for all patrons in the outdoor amphitheater, and for the actors backstage, regardless of vaccine status.



Gerald C. Rivers in “Julius Caesar” at the outdoor Will Geer’s Theatricum Botanicum.

*(Ian Flanders
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Thor Steingraber, artistic director of **the Soraya**, which has announced an October reopening, said his Northridge center has long proceeded cautiously in the pandemic. To that end, he says the venue will offer masked seating sections and vaccination-only sections. Patrons will be asked to remain masked indoors when in common areas.

Center Theatre Group, which is not returning to live shows until Nov. 30, has time on its side. Managing Director and Chief Executive Meghan Pressman said the company hasn’t yet decided on proof of vaccination or a COVID-19 test requirement.

“The pandemic landscape is shifting,” she said, “and we are taking in information and experiences from other venues and companies and the scientific community as we consider different possible requirements.”

Art meet film, now celebrate

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art's glitzy Art + Film Gala, which is scheduled to take place Nov. 6, will honor contemporary artists Amy Sherald and Kehinde Wiley and filmmaker Steven Spielberg. Wiley and Sherald's portraits of the Obamas will go on view at LACMA from Nov. 7 to Jan. 2 as part of a five-city tour organized by the National Portrait Gallery, and Spielberg was the lead donor for the portraits, writes **Makeda Easter**.

Put on some ruby slippers when the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures officially opens to the public Sept. 30. The museum announced its inaugural programming, and guess what classic film will kick off the festivities? Yep, it's two screenings of "The Wizard of Oz," reports **Deborah Vankin**. The museum has 115-plus screenings and other events planned in two theaters during its first three months. The inaugural special exhibition is a retrospective of Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki.

The mystery in 14th century Venetian art

It's an interesting puzzle: What happened to the Madonna and child in a missing section of a 14th century alterpiece by Paolo Veneziano — Paul the Venetian — on display in what Times' art critic **Christopher Knight** calls a "captivating new exhibition" at the J. Paul Getty Museum.



Triptych (detail), circa 1340, in the exhibit “Paolo Veneziano: Art & Devotion in 14th-Century Venice” at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

(Gary Coronado/Los Angeles Times)

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“Many art historians regard the late-medieval artist as the first great painter in a city that would go on to produce some of the greatest in European art history. (Think Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione and Titian.) Exhibitions of his work don’t come up often in the United States, which makes this one must-see,” writes Knight.

The exhibit is small in size but big on sumptuous golden hues. It’s packed with fascination for art fans eager to get inside the minds of curators and art historians who regularly seek to reconstruct timeless masterpieces.

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Easily 10,000 strong at the Hollywood Bowl

Times' classical music critic **Mark Swed** attended the first official night of the Los Angeles Philharmonic summer season and found that the “Bowl is big-time back,” estimating the crowd to be at least 10,000 strong.

“There were no requirements for masks, distancing, vaccinations or tests. Picnicking was nearly ubiquitous,” writes Swed.

Viola Davis splendidly narrated “Peter and the Wolf,” and stirring pieces by the neglected composer Margaret Bonds and the great Duke Ellington paid tribute to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.



Viola Davis narrates “Peter and the Wolf,” as the L.A. Philharmonic performs, at the Hollywood Bowl.

(Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times)

“Not only was this the first time that Dudamel and the L.A. Phil were able to perform before an everyday L.A. public since March 8, 2020,” Swed writes, but the concert felt “a world away from that first special Bowl program for a small, invited crowd of distanced, masked first responders exactly two months earlier.”

The L.A. Phil has surveyed its audience and found an overwhelming majority are vaccinated, but Swed says with case counts rising, "Everyone I spoke with felt safe but in slightly surreal surroundings."

There is still lots to do in the city in the summer

A Pasadena Pops tribute to Fleetwood Mac, a musical salute to Linda Ronstadt at Segerstrom Center for the Arts, the return of that crazy Jurassic Quest dinosaur drive-thru and live comedy by Groundlings are a small sampling of **Matt Cooper's** weekly list of things to do when you need to get your going out on.

And last but not least ...

I want to say hello to my father, Joe Gelt, in this newsletter. I think he reads it — and Carolina Miranda's byline — more than he reads my stories. So, hi, Papa! I love you.