

## The Guardian (UK) Culture Professionals Network

### Hurricane Sandy: arts organisations survey the damage after the storm

Buildings may be left intact, reports **Howard Sherman**, but culture is counting the costs of cuts, cancellations and curfews



From dangling cranes to insurance claims, the ripple effect of Hurricane Sandy is making itself felt on arts groups.  
Photograph: KeystoneUSA-ZUMA / Rex Features

For performing arts organisations in the northeastern US, Hurricane Sandy and its aftermath has proved to be a challenge of economics, logistics and communication, not rescue, recovery or repair. Remarkably, few venues report structural or water damage despite the sustained winds and flooding – but their operations are suspended all the same, and they are receiving updates about progress through the same channels as the rest of the public.

"In the absence of real information, I've become an information junkie," says Greg Reiner, executive director of the Classic Stage Company in Manhattan. Though his theatre was in the blackout zone of lower Manhattan from Monday night to Friday afternoon, Reiner was able to keep tabs at home from his Brooklyn neighbourhood, which retained power throughout. In this era of telecommuting, his staff was able to operate remotely, calling and emailing day by day to update visitors on the theatre's performance status, during what was originally to be the opening week of its new production of *Ivanov*. "Our development director has grant deadlines that aren't going away," Reiner observes.

In hard-hit New Jersey, Michael Hurst of the Two River Theatre Company in Red Bank also reports no damage, and very fast power restoration thanks to operating on the same grid as the local hospital. However, Monmouth County, where they're located, has instituted a 6pm to 6am public curfew, due to downed trees and power lines that would be hard to see in the dark, so they are still unable to perform. As of Friday, they had lost nine performances between two concurrent productions, and are only assured of Saturday and Sunday matinees unless the curfew is lifted.

At Manhattan's famed Carnegie Hall, operations ceased not because of damage or power loss, but because of damage to a nearby construction crane, which dangled precariously forcing an evacuation of all neighbouring buildings, including the hall. Clive Gillinson, executive and artistic director, says that their

reopening is complicated. "We're talking more than once a day to the company that is developing the building and to the city. It's two sets of decisions. Each has to come up with their own solution. Thursday night I was given the information that they hope to have the crane secured in a way that could open the street on Monday. But until they've done the job and the city approves it, they cannot know deadlines."

Amid this wait-and-see atmosphere, how are organisations managing? Two River Theatre has become a community resource. "We've opened our lobby as a charging station and as a hangout station," says Hurst, citing more than 100 taking advantage of the opportunity in the first 24 hours. "Our offer was shared on Facebook more than 600 times and liked over 2,000 times. One woman who was here learned about it from her sister in Boston."

CSC, located in what Reiner refers to as New York's new SoPo neighborhood ("South of power"), speaks of the company's makeshift Ivanov rehearsal uptown in donated space at the Snapple Theatre Center. "We just got the cast together to do a line through. Everyone was dying to see one another and wanted to feel like they were doing something. It was a big morale booster to be in a room together. In the meantime, we're still trying to finalise the cast for Passion, our next show, based on auditions held last week, so the world keeps moving even though the theatre is dark."

At Carnegie Hall, Gillinson notes that because of their own current construction work, separate from the nearby crane, their offices are already relocated outside of the evacuation area. "If we think this is a nightmare, it would have been ten times worse. We were unbelievably lucky."

Gillinson describes the rescheduling work underway due to the evacuation, with some concerts postponed and others moved to other sites. An example is the immediate decision to alter its construction schedule, which would have led to the hall closing all summer from 1 June, but would now allow them to reschedule a storm week benefit for the Lang Lang Foundation on 3 June. "You have to keep everyone happy," explains Gillinson, "Both those who are performing and the audiences. It's great when you can satisfy everyone and even enhance relationships. That's the objective."

Even though power returned to lower Manhattan on Friday evening, the longterm economic impact remains a concern. Virginia P Louloudes, executive director of the Alliance for Resident Theatres/New York (ART/NY), says the company had to "prepare ourselves for the amount of loan requests" and cites a \$2.1m fund they created. "Before 9/11, people were afraid of borrowing. But now, in a situation like this, the loan fund is very helpful to have."

ART/NY collaborated with the national Theatre Communications Group on a survey of theatres to assess the extent of damage, and New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs distributed a survey covering all arts organisations, not just theatres. "My understanding is that DCA is leading the charge on reaching out to funders for support, but I've already been contact by one funder asking for information."

Teresa Eyring, executive director of the Theatre Communications Group, notes that "funders will be under a lot of pressure to help the entire community, not just theatres. That could have a potential impact on longterm funding."

Every company interviewed speaks of the impact over time, from cancelling performances, to altering production schedules, to pursuing insurance claims, if possible. None would hazard a guess at the overall cost of the storm. Gillinson notes, "One can't calculate all the financial implications. All we can do is collate the information."

Eyring cites a ripple effect – "I do think the economic toll is going to be very significant" – and echoes Reiner's prediction that CSC is going to take "a really devastating hit." But Hurst is quick to point out: "It's a little difficult to focus on our day to day realities when you're looking at people's destroyed homes."

*Howard Sherman is an arts consultant, journalist and former theatre manager – read his blog and follow him on Twitter @hesherman*