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By Ronni Reich

Aftermath of Sandy continues to challenge N.J. theaters, productions

Not long ago, Gabor and SuzAnne Barabas, who founded the New Jersey Repertory Company in 1997, were congratulating themselves on achieving financial stability as a nonprofit theater company in a challenging economy.

The company, which devotes itself to new plays, has been thriving artistically as well. This year, NJ Rep was one of 10 theaters selected nationwide for a grant from the American Theatre Wing, the organization behind the Tony Awards.

But “we were saying all it would take is a gust of wind to put us into a more problematic situation,” Gabor (Gabe) recalled this week.

“Of course, we didn’t expect a 100-mile-an-hour gust of wind,” he said.

Located in Long Branch, NJ Rep is one of the theaters most critically hurt by Hurricane Sandy, but it is far from alone. Repairs and cancellations have affected companies all over the state, costing many thousands of dollars.

So far, NJ Rep has canceled 11 performances. The 60-seat venue suffered damage to its roof and awning, which, combined with ticket losses, is expected to cost \$50,000. In addition, a century-old cottage in which out-of-town actors have stayed throughout the theater’s history has been destroyed. Gabe estimates that to save it would cost an additional \$300,000.

The theater is currently closed and without phone service.

“We ... canceled through the weekend with fingers crossed that we might be able to open next week if we get electricity,” SuzAnne said. She and her husband spoke from their car, where they were charging their cell phones.

Theaters located near the Shore were hit particularly hard.

Two River Theater Company in Red Bank has had to cancel 12 performances. Although undamaged and with power by mid-week, the curfew in Monmouth County interfered with evening performances.

TRTC responded by offering charging stations and hot coffee and tea in the afternoons and pay-what-you-can matinees over the weekend. (It resumes evening performances tomorrow.)

So far, the theater has lost a little more than \$50,000 in ticket revenue. It has arranged local housing for actors who were commuting from New York and the production staff will work extra night and weekend hours to build a set in time for “A Wind in the Willows Christmas,” which opens next month.

Theaters farther north were affected as well. Some venues, such as the Paper Mill Playhouse, happened to have a week without major performances when the storm hit.

Others, including the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, had less fortunate timing.

Last week, the theater had to cancel four “Man of La Mancha” performances as well as the one-night-only “Something Wicked This Way Comes,” which was postponed to Monday. Director of marketing Rick Engler estimated between \$60,000 and \$70,000 in revenue losses.

Engler said the musical’s run will be extended through Nov. 25. Those who had tickets to a canceled performance will be able to attend another show at no extra cost and accommodations will be made for those who cannot attend the run at all.

“‘Man of La Mancha’ has proven to be extremely popular and we expect to regain the momentum we had prior to the storm,” he said.

That can-do spirit could be found even in those who were still in the dark about their prospects.

The Surfflight Theater, for example, along with much of its Long Beach Island home, has been inaccessible for days.

“It has stopped us cold,” said executive director Ken Myers.

A production of Neil Simon’s “Barefoot in the Park” had to be canceled mid-run. The company is currently rehearsing its big holiday event, “White Christmas” in Manhattan. But it is still unclear whether it can go up by the planned date of Nov. 23.

“As far as we’ve learned, the damage to the theater is severe in certain areas, but then in the areas of the theater where we would work in production it is not bad at all,” Myers said.

He and his staff have to decide whether to find a new venue for the show or to wait out the rebuilding process to see if performing at home might be an option.

“We are almost a company without a theater,” he said.

Still, he added, if he and his audience could just reach Beach Haven, the company could be up-and-running within 48 hours.

In fact, the company’s educational branch worked on nearly such a strict timetable to prepare a student performance that took place yesterday. The staff rebuilt sets and re-recorded music.

Myers expects the Surfflight to rebound and considers Sandy less of a challenge than the financial crisis.

“This we can overcome,” he said.

“We are coming off a season that will allow us to continue into the future.”

Still, the physical losses and the cost of the interruption to the business remain to be seen.

“I can’t tell you what we’ve lost because we can’t get to our computers,” Myers said. “Everything is on the island.”