

# THEATRES SET STAGE TO WELCOME BACK AUDIENCES AGAIN

'THE FUTURE IS LOOKING HOPEFUL,' SAYS JOHN KARASTAMATIS



**JOHN KARASTAMATIS**  
Column

he shut his theatres.

All four Mirvish theatres were in operation with popular shows, including the long-awaited Broadway blockbuster "Hamilton", which had just begun a 14-week sold-out run. (It would only play four weeks.)

Audiences were furious. Some could not understand why the shows were shut down when the government had not yet mandated a lockdown. (It would do so a few days later.)

They felt cheated of en-

tertainment.

Similarly, actors, musicians, technicians and theatre staff felt cheated of their passion and livelihoods.

Nobody chooses to work in theatre because it's a paycheck.

You can find jobs that pay a lot more and are a lot more reliable.

We work in theatre because we love it. We wouldn't be able to live without it.

Having our entire sector shut down was shocking, something nobody had even considered.

When it became clear that this wasn't going to be a short pause, we had to face the ugly truth: the theatre



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can't exist without an audience; an audience is a collection of strangers who congregate in close proximity to watch a live performance. In other words, the ideal scenario for a virus to spread.

How long will this pandemic last? If it lasts a very long time, could audiences forget about going to the theatre altogether?

Will everyone become addicted to getting their entertainment at home? Could this be the end of the theatre?

These existential questions have haunted us for two years now.

There has been some respite, like this past fall when the government suddenly declared that it was safe enough for fully vac-

inated audiences to take in a show, as long as everyone was masked.

For a few months we were able to feel like our work mattered again, that we had a purpose.

Just as suddenly, it was all over when Omicron made its rude appearance.

But now, the future is looking hopeful. Omicron is on a downward trajectory and theatres are being allowed to reopen at 50 per cent capacity, and (hopefully) on March 14 at 100 per cent.

Most Mirvish theatres are scheduled to reopen April 5 with the CAA Ed Mirvish Theatre slated to reopen on May 31 with the biggest play ever to be staged in Canada: "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child". It looks like theatre will not only survive but flourish.

*John Karastamatis is director of sales and marketing for Mirvish Productions.*

## ■ COMMUNITY

# 'WE WANTED TO DO THIS IN A WAY THAT GAVE BACK TO THE PUBLIC'

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efined as visitors travelling from 40 kilometres away or more.

"We're definitely drawing people from other areas to come get out and enjoy what Uxbridge has to offer," John-Mackenzie continued. "There are a lot of different activities people are doing on the trails, you have the traditional hiking, biking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, but we're also seeing a lot of new interest in fat biking, for instance, which extends the biking season into the winter."

At Slabtown Cider Co. on Concession 6, co-owner Lori Feddema said many of the visitors to their outdoor heated patio have been coming in off the trails.

"We have a lot of guests that come in and say, 'We



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were just hiking on the trails and we wanted something warm to drink,' or something to eat, we have regulars and still get a lot of new guests that come in for the first time," she said. "The nice thing is because they are either snowshoeing or hiking with the family they are dressed and geared up to sit on the patio. With the pandemic we couldn't have people inside, so we've adjusted and found different ways to make it nice for them on the patio."

For longtime outdoor

enthusiast John Fisher, the pandemic presented the perfect opportunity to pursue a longtime dream. Fisher and his wife, along with Rick and Cindy Batty — parents of Olympic mountain biker Emily Batty — have teamed up to renovate the former Skyloft into the Trail Hub, a new destination for trail users.

"We initially put in an offer to purchase it just before COVID and then this worldwide pandemic came about and we said, 'We better think about this again,'" Fisher recalls. "Then a year

later, it was still on the market and we said, 'You know what, this is the time to buy it.' We just thought it would be great if it stayed out of private hands and was public, it's too spectacular of a property to have it owned by one person. It's been a great COVID project."

The group is gearing up for an opening later this winter, and plan to position the facility as a central destination for trail users.

"The property really is in the centre of all those trails and up until now there have been virtually no amenities available," said Fisher of the facility, which will offer indoor bathrooms, food and snacks courtesy of Annina's Bakeshop and possibly more services, such as a bike shop, in the future.

Although the opening has been delayed by CO-

VID, Fisher said he is confident the facility will receive a warm reception.

"While we had these lockdowns, a lot of people discovered the forest that had not been there before, a lot of people found a new love they wouldn't have found without COVID," Fisher said. "We wanted to do this in a way that gave back to the public and put a smile on people's faces, that's what it's all about."

While many will return to a busier lifestyle once lockdowns are lifted, John-Mackenzie said the increase in traffic and tourism is likely to continue.

"There is a general trend to doing things safely outdoors and the tourism industry is certainly responding to that," she said. "I'm sure once people go back to their regular lives it will subside a little bit, but

once people have been introduced to the outdoors and different activities, that will be sustained for years to come."

For more information on local trails and activities, visit [www.discoveruxbridge.ca](http://www.discoveruxbridge.ca).

*STORY BEHIND THE STORY: As the Trail Capital of Canada, Uxbridge was uniquely situated to benefit from the explosion in demand for outdoor recreation. We spoke to local officials, businesses and services to find out what that increase meant for them, and what happens as we look ahead to a post-pandemic world.*



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