The actors were unmasked for the show’s opening. Then came questions about whether they were vaccinated

Two incidents underscore how the theater industry has to deal with the uncertainty of the virus itself and enforcement norms.
A portrait of actor Avi Jacobson at his home in Albany.
Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

As Chanticleers Theatre’s production of “The Four Poster” began its run last month, ticket buyers might have felt reassured by the COVID protocols listed on the Castro Valley community theater’s website. Masks were required for audience members and staff, though the play's two actors, Rhonda Joy Taylor and Roger Caetano, would perform unmasked.

But Avi Jacobson wasn’t satisfied. An actor based in Albany who has auditioned for Chanticleers Theatre shows, he’d heard rumors that Taylor and Caetano had not been vaccinated against the coronavirus. If that was true, he said, he envisioned the unmasked actors possibly expectorating on unsuspecting older audience members inside the company’s intimate, 99-seat venue.

“Apart from the fact that it could become a superspreader event, it could make the theater scene or community synonymous with or associated with the proliferation of this
The actors were unmasked for the show’s opening. Then came questions about whether they were vaccinated | Datebook

disease,” he told The Chronicle. “There had to be a way to make the community aware of this.”

So on July 18, he shared his concerns on a Bay Area theater group Facebook page. At “around the same time,” he reached out to Chanticleers.

Chanticleers, led by board president and Artistic Director John Baiocchi, never responded to Jacobson directly but did post a statement on Facebook the same day Jacobson contacted him. “We are not required to ask vaccination status,” the statement said in part. It added that its actors, even when unmasked, are more than six feet from the audience and that, outside of the show, the two actors are engaged to be married and are part of the same household.

Public health is her day job. Acting was supposed to be a release. COVID ruined that, too

The actors were unmasked for the show’s opening. Then came questions about whether they were vaccinated | Datebook

Roger Caetano (left) and Rhonda Joy Taylor in Chanticleers Theatre’s “The Four Poster.”
Photo: Chanticleers Theatre

But on July 22, the company decided to cancel all remaining in-person performances of “The Four Poster” (still offering a streaming option). It also canceled its next show, “The Bridges of Madison County.”

“These decisions are due to the dramatic increase in COVID cases,” an unnamed theater representative wrote in an email to The Chronicle. “Beyond that, we have no further comment as a company.”

Chanticleers also declined to elaborate on its initial statement about not being required to know actors’ vaccination status.

Neither Taylor nor Caetano responded to interview requests for this story, nor did they confirm their coronavirus vaccination status. Caetano’s Facebook page lists Pfizer, one of the major COVID-19 vaccine makers, as his employer.

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Theater companies across the Bay Area are grappling with their public health responsibilities to audiences and workers as the delta variant spreads. On July 27, Tenderloin indie theater venue PianoFight canceled most of the run of “Blessed Of PianoFight ReOpening Showcase,” citing “the health and safety of our community.” On July 28, Oakland Theater Project canceled its outdoor production of “The Dream Life of Malcolm X.”

“We have made this change because we have just experienced a COVID-19 exposure and breakthrough infection in the workplace from someone who was fully vaccinated,” Oakland Theater Project Managing Director Colin Manlin wrote in an email.
San Francisco's Custom Made Theatre Company has also postponed its October show to February.

"Performers are often in arm's reach of patrons both on stage and during entrances and exits," Artistic Director Brian Katz told The Chronicle. "While it's technically possible to be in compliance (with 6 feet of distancing), it would be pushing the spirit of the law and feels very dangerous."

Chanticleers, meanwhile, isn't the only theater company coming under scrutiny for its handling of COVID safety guidelines. On July 24, Vallejo freelance theater critic Charles Kruger raised concerns about whether San Francisco Playhouse had adhered to its masking rules at that evening's opening performance of "The Song of Summer."
On the same Facebook theater group page where Jacobson posted, Kruger shared that he witnessed a box office attendant going unmasked, top staffers conversing with unmasked patrons and multiple audience members going without masks throughout the performance. (The Chronicle attended a later performance of the same show and did not observe any masking protocol violations.)

Contacted by The Chronicle, S.F. Playhouse Producing Director Susi Damilano confirmed Kruger's claims about the attendant and her own unmasked conversations with patrons, but said she did not observe the claim about audience members. Kruger's Facebook post "made us recognize that we have an opportunity to do better," she said, so the playhouse has added to its previous protocols. In addition to posting a masking policy on its website, the theater now issues a masking reminder as part of each curtain speech before a performance starts.
To be clear, declining to verify actors’ vaccination status, as Chanticleers has done, is potentially much riskier than anything Kruger observed at S.F. Playhouse. Damilano confirmed that her entire cast and staff are vaccinated. The theater also checks audience members for proof of a vaccination or negative coronavirus test before they enter the venue.

But the two incidents underscore how theater producers have to deal with the uncertainty not only of the virus itself but also of enforcement norms.

San Francisco Playhouse co-founder Susi Damilano welcomes back an audience as San Francisco Playhouse presents “Hold These Truths” in San Francisco.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

Damilano said the Aug. 3 indoor mask mandate by seven Bay Area counties and the city of Berkeley (which exempts performers in “live audience or recorded settings, events or productions,” including theater) has made enforcement among patrons simpler.
“All I have to do is walk up to someone and point at my mask,” Damilano said, adding she’s observed just one breach of protocol since opening night.

Still, the mandate doesn’t tell theaters, or any other type of business, how to enforce it. It’s also not clear at what point a violation of the mask mandate would merit expulsion from a theater.

During an Aug. 2 press conference, Dr. Naveena Bobba, a deputy director at the San Francisco Department of Public Health, said her department “will not necessarily be leaning on enforcement” but on making sure residents understand what’s healthiest for them and their neighbors.

Actors’ Equity Association, the union representing stage managers and actors, also requires masks for audiences in the safety guidance it issues to producers who work with its members, but it, too, does not specify how theaters ought to enforce those rules.

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Theaters have long had norms and policies about cell phone use and otherwise disruptive audience members, but those rules don’t translate easily to dealing with mask compliance. Damilano said that if an S.F. Playhouse audience member is interfering with the show or fellow spectators, a stage manager or stagehand can summon someone to deal with the situation.

But it’s much harder to detect a mask violation in the dark than it is a glowing cell phone screen or rowdy behavior. And the risks involved — a spoiled scene or show versus the spread of a potentially deadly disease — don’t compare.
San Francisco Playhouse co-founder Susi Damilano’s dog, Emi, surveys the scene before a performance of "Hold These Truths."
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

Damilano said the playhouse has no plans to post ushers watching for masking compliance. Instead, the company is promoting “personal responsibility,” reminding audiences “we’re all in this together.”

For critic Kruger, though, a protocol is a protocol.

“If you’re going to have the rule, you need to have sufficient ushers in the theater to identify noncompliance and speak to people,” he said, adding that enforcing masking rules is important enough to disrupt a performance.
San Francisco Playhouse co-founder Susi Damilano (center right) welcomes theatergoer Sandra Robbins before San Francisco Playhouse’s “Hold These Truths.”
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

Chanticleers’ statement to The Chronicle asserted that the company’s procedures with “The Four Poster” were “in keeping with guidance from Alameda County.” It linked to a July 16 announcement from Contra Costa Health Services (co-signed by Alameda, other Bay Area counties and the city of Berkeley) that states masking was recommended indoors regardless of vaccination status. “Fully vaccinated employees are encouraged to wear masks indoors if their employer has not confirmed the vaccination status of those around them,” it reads.

Chanticleers’ logic seems to be that Contra Costa’s advisory implies that employers are not required to ask workers their vaccine status, so it’s still within guidelines. That same statement, however, recommends that businesses “ensure easy verification that all unvaccinated people are masked” in indoor settings, including theaters.
How workers are classified further muddies the situation at the Castro Valley theater.

When asked about Chanticleers' actions regarding “The Four Poster,” the Alameda County Public Health Department referred The Chronicle to state workplace safety agency Cal/OSHA. But Cal/OSHA’s rules regulate only employer-employee workplaces. Chanticleers, a very small nonprofit, declined to answer questions about how it classifies its staff and artists, but its publicly available 990 tax form from 2019 lists no payments to employees.
Many community theaters pay their artists a pittance or not at all. But from a public health perspective, community theater looks a lot like professional theater. Both involve actors projecting their voices, sometimes singing, in an enclosed space — a high-risk activity in a pandemic. Both also attract older audience members, a population especially vulnerable to the virus.

... Community theaters are a vital part of the art form. They allow nonprofessional artists to express themselves, provide an early stage in many artists’ careers, and recruit audiences with their accessible prices and neighborhood locations. Their existence attests that theater is for everyone.

But Chanticleers’ situation raises questions about whether these companies are equipped to deal with a crisis as complex and ever-evolving as the COVID pandemic.

Jacqui Herrera Frankle of Alameda, who’s acted and directed for Chanticleers in the past, said “shoestring” isn’t adequate to describe the company’s budget. “It’s, like, torn shoestring,” she said. For instance, one of her two actors in “Tuesdays with Morrie,” staged in 2016, had to buy his own costume.

The “Four Poster” incident, she said, makes her hesitant to work with any community theater until the pandemic passes.
Christina Boothman, at her home in Martinez, lost the chance to play her dream role in Chanticleers Theatre’s “The Bridges of Madison County” after the theater canceled in-person performances of two plays following a social media outcry over its COVID protocols.

Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Martinez actor Christina Boothman, who was supposed to star in Chanticleers’ next show, “The Bridges of Madison County,” said she doesn’t envision working with the company again under its current leadership.

In theater, she said, “It is your job not just to be safe but to keep all of your fellow actors and crew safe. That’s what you should be thinking about if you’re in an emotionally challenging scene and there’s nudity. It’s what you have to think about if you’re building platforms: Does this have brakes on it?”

Chanticleers, she added, “didn’t uphold their responsibility to keep the theater community – which includes our audience members – safe. That just feels bad.”