

Dean Richards:

We continue with our weekend theater segment. If you were watching the TV morning news this week, you saw me talking about a tee shirt that you could get that supports Chicago's theater community. I talked about it also on my segment on the Bob Saracho that we do every weekday morning from 8:00 to 8:30. And I wanted to just expand on all of that a little bit now, as we bring in Aaron Aptaker, who is the Director of Audience Experience with Steppenwolf Theater Company. Aaron welcome to WGN. Nice to have you with us.

Aaron Aptaker:

Dean, thank you so much for having me and Happy Mother's Day to all of the mothers out there.

Dean Richards:

Absolutely Happy Mother's Day, moms. This actually would be a fantastic mother's day gift for mom if she is a theater lover, because you've found a way to help raise some money for all of the workers in Chicago theaters who have found themselves suddenly out of work with the COVID-19 shutdown that's taken place. Take us back to the beginning of all of this and how all of this started.

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah. We are always stronger when we act together. We hold that to be a truth at Steppenwolf. It's why we're an ensemble theater. And that idea was really the core inspiration for us, for the Chicago Acts Together Initiative. So when this crisis hit, we looked around and very quickly realized that the only way that the theater community was going to be able to confront this situation, is if we rallied together, if there was a united front. And so we've reached out to our friends in the community, asked them to join with us to promote this fantastic charity. We have over one hundred groups who have signed on to create just a beautiful tee shirt. It has all of our names on it and we're donating one hundred percent of the proceeds to the Chicago Theater Workers Relief Fund.

Dean Richards:

Yeah. I think that's great that one hundred percent of the proceeds are going to help. Now explain who is actually involved in this, because when we think of theater people being out of work, we think, oh, the actors and actresses, they're not acting, but it's so much more than that, isn't it?

Aaron Aptaker:

Absolutely. So theater is a collaborative art and so everyone you see on stage, actors, but there's a lot of backstage designers through the front of house folks who welcome you. This is an ecosystem that has just been impacted in a major way by the closure. And so the artists relief fund itself, the Chicago Theater Workers Relief Fund, was founded specifically in response to this crisis. The league of Chicago theaters, which is the city's alliance of theaters in the local area, they were given a very generous contribution by the volunteer usher organization, The Saints. That kick started this fund. Others have been donating along the way and as a leader in the community, we felt an obligation to spread awareness to our audiences of this fantastic fund.

Aaron Aptaker:

Direct contributions are going to folks who have lost income, so this is very important. It's individual donations that folks who have lost work are getting. The actors, designers, everyone we were talking about, if they've lost work because of this, they're going to reach out and often receive a grant from this fund the same day that they apply. It's helping folks make ends meet and making a huge impact.

Dean Richards:

Yeah, this is a very tangible way that you can make a donation to get one of these tee shirts, but help people who are suddenly trying to figure out how they're going to pay the rent, how they're going to get their meals, how they're going to live day to day as so many people are wondering that same question. But here is a very tangible way that you can help those who are working in the world of theater. If you've

enjoyed theater, if you've gone to see plays or musicals at any of the Chicago theaters, this is a way of saying thank you to the people who have put those shows on. And can I tell you, I don't know who designed this tee shirt but it's the coolest design. I love it.

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah, it's a beautiful shirt. So I can describe for the listeners that the front of the shirt, it's a gorgeous hand illustrated Chicago skyline illustrated by our very own lead designer, Christopher Huizar. It says Chicago Acts Together and the back of the shirt features, it's over one hundred companies now who have signed on to participate. It's growing every day. I mean, it's a gorgeous shirt, a way for anyone who's a part of the community to signal their involvement. So many people at Steppenwolf involved. Megan, too many people to name, the league of Chicago theaters and then of course, all of these other organizations who have participated. Other thing to mention, Dean, the shirt is being made by a Chicago printmaker. So not only are folks going to be helping support folks who are out of work right now, they're also going to be supporting Rowboat Creative, which is a Chicago based company, helping keep folks in work during this crisis.

Dean Richards:

Yeah, it's fantastic. It's a beautiful shirt. I made my donation and will probably wear my shirt to show my love of the Chicago theater community and I hope that our listeners who also love theater will do the same thing. It's a great donation to help the theater community and you'll get yourself a really nice, beautiful tee shirt at the same time. Now explain how you can get this, because there are a couple of different sites where you can order this. I've just been sending everyone to your site, steppenwolf.org, because it's easy to remember, but there are a couple of ways to do this. We should mention both.

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah, absolutely. I'd say the easiest way is steppenwolf.org. Steppenwolf with two p's. It's right on our homepage. You can't miss it. And you can also go directly to the created to care website if you just want to purchase the shirt and not read about all the cool companies participating. But I'd say the easiest way for folks to get there is through steppenwolf.org. It's right on the homepage. Also really important that folks know, this shirt is not going to be available forever, so this is a limited campaign. Folks need to make this contribution before May 12th.

Dean Richards:

Oh, okay. So we do have a little bit of a deadline, which would be, you have to do it before Tuesday then. So today and tomorrow, basically, right?

Aaron Aptaker:

There's another week, or pardon me, it's that May 19th. I've given too much pressure to folks. You've got a bit more time than that.

Dean Richards:

But don't wait. Don't wait that long. Don't wait until the last minute.

Aaron Aptaker:

Exactly. The point is get it this weekend.

Dean Richards:

Yeah. You won't be sorry. If you're a theater fan, you won't be sorry that you got this tee shirt. Again, steppenwolf.org is the easiest way to do it. You'll see where you can click to make the very simple order. You can order the shirt. It's \$30. If you want to donate more, there is an opportunity to donate more than that, but that is all available for you (singing).

Dean Richards:

It's 10:41. This is Dean Richards Sunday morning on WGN. Coming up after 11:00, Dr. Robert Murphy, epidemiologist talks to us about the breaking COVID-19 news from last night of three members of the coronavirus task force being put in quarantine. We'll explain what happened, the precautions that need to take place, what will happen next, how this may affect you. That's all coming up. Plus for Mother's Day, we go back into the vault for a, I think it's 2015 visit, that my mom had on our show when we did one of our tree time broadcasts, clearly the biggest celebrity in the house when my mom would show up on the show. So we'll have some fun and play that for you coming up in a little while.

Dean Richards:

In the meantime, we are talking with Aaron Aptaker, who is Steppenwolf's Audience Experience Director about this great tee shirt that you can purchase to support Chicago theater workers. Right now, we'll repeat all the information on how you can order that in a couple of minutes. Aaron, I just want to know what is an audience experience director. I love your title. It sounds so fun.

Aaron Aptaker:

Thank you so much. Yeah, so in general, the audience experience director, if you think about, when you go to the theater, the vibe and everything that happens around the art itself, that is our world. And so typically, that means giving people a really easy, accessible, and fun time at the theater. However, we've needed to remain incredibly adaptable. As you may know, all of our work has shifted into the digital space now. We're really lucky that we are still able to connect with our audience in this time and that we've seen just such an overwhelming outpouring of interest from our audience in staying engaged through these digital offerings. So we are reinventing what audio experience looks like even as we speak.

Dean Richards:

Sure. So before the shutdown, typically, what would your job involve? What would be the kinds of things that you would be working on with a given production that might be running at Steppenwolf?

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah, so all of our accessibility services, all of our performances at Steppenwolf, we offer American sign language interpretation, opening captioning, and then audio description services for those who are blind or have low vision. And so just making sure that regardless of whether you have a disability or not, that you're able to access our art and be a part of our community. And then the same thing goes for folks without disabilities. We just want the theater to be a really accessible and welcoming place. Regardless of where you're coming from, you can come to Steppenwolf, you're going to feel like you belong, you're going to have intelligent creative people in the lobby who are ready to talk with you about the plays. And it's a deeper level of engagement than you might get just going to a Broadway theater and being shepherded in with thousands of people.

Dean Richards:

Yeah. So, it's almost everything else other than what's going on on-stage. It's the audience experience of everything that happens before the show starts and once the show is over to make it as pleasant as possible to come in and enjoy something at Steppenwolf.

Aaron Aptaker:

Absolutely. And what I always tell folks is we can have the best play in the world on our stage, but if you had a bad experience getting to your seat, you're probably not going to be in a place to receive that play. So our job is to set up the art to have the most successful chance to reach an audience.

Dean Richards:

Yeah. Makes a big difference with everything else that's going on before and after the show. So you talked about how everything has focused now, digitally. Everything has gone online until things reopen again. What are some of the things that are going on right now digitally with Steppenwolf?

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah, we have a fantastic slate of digital programming. We're really happy that our education programming, which is so essential to our mission of enrichment, we've been able to move that online. So we are offering a free series of digital workshops. Anyone can attend these. They're live-streamed. Our next one is coming up with best-selling author, Erica Sanchez. That's going to be this Tuesday, May 12th at 4:30 PM. So any writers out there feel free to attend and all of these workshops are going to be accessible as well as easy. So we'll be offering American sign language interpretation and live captioning for these education workshops. Just a great chance for folks to stay engaged and keep those brands spinning while we are all trapped in our homes.

Dean Richards:

Was it Erica Sanchez, isn't she the writer of the show that you had running, I'm Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter? Am I remembering that correctly?

Aaron Aptaker:

Yes. Yeah, she wrote the novel that we adapted into, I'm Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter, the stage production. It was playing to sold out houses just before we did have to close down. You're correct. The run was shortened. Just last night, we had our annual gala also moved to online, looking to raise money to bring that show back next season, because so many school groups, families weren't able to see that show and it was a tremendous production. We want to make sure that everyone is able to experience that.

Dean Richards:

Hey, how did the virtual gala go last night? We had Gary Cole on our TV morning news this week and he talked about it. It was called Pants Optional, if I remember correctly. Am I right?

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah, you're correct. The Pants Optional Soiree. Spoiler alert, I did wear pants. I took that option and it was a tremendous night. Not meant to be online, but we're just so proud of our entire team who put together this fantastic, I mean, they were in a TV studio, like a telethon event. Chris Rock participated. Armie Hammer, Claire Danes, so many other celebrities and we raised over \$600,000-

Dean Richards:

Wow.

Aaron Aptaker:

... To help bring this show back next year. But we're not quite at our goal, so we do have that link still active on our website as well. Highly encourage folks, if you weren't able to see the show, we really want to bring it back. You can also donate to help us do that.

Dean Richards:

Yeah, that's fantastic that you were able to raise that much money with a virtual event, that people are clearly interested in, clearly have a lot of affection for the kind of projects that Steppenwolf turn out. And it speaks to the national reputation of Steppenwolf when you get people like Chris Rock and Armie Hammer and others who have national and international profiles that they care to participate in something to support Steppenwolf.

Aaron Aptaker:

Absolutely. I mean, art is essential to who we are, Dean, and I think everyone knows that. Artists know that. Our audiences and community know that. And so we have seen in this unprecedented moment in ways we never thought we'd see, just inspiring support coming out left and right from the woodwork to boost us up. We're so grateful for it.

Dean Richards:

Yeah, that's fantastic. I'm glad the event went well and thank you for the update on whether or not you were wearing pants during the event. I'm sure many people probably were not. You also have some podcasts that are going on right now as well, don't you?

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah, so we launched a half hour podcast. This is going to be an inside peak at our ensemble. So if you have ever watched these folks on stage and have wondered, what are they actually like in person? Now's your chance. These are extended one-on-one conversations. One ensemble member interviewing another. So far, we have had Jeff Perry, one of our co-founders, K. Todd Freeman and Catherine Erbe and on May 18th, the fourth episode will drop with William Peterson of CSI fame.

Dean Richards:

Oh, wow. That's a really a credit to Steppenwolf as well, that many of the original ensemble members, some of the early ensemble members, all come back to participate in Steppenwolf events. It's not like they're forgotten. The Laurie Metcalf's always come back. The Joan Allen's always came back. Before his passing, the great John Mahoney always would come back. John Malcovich comes back. Gary Sinise. I mean, all of the original people who put this rather irreverent group together back in the day, still are very much involved in keeping things active at your theater.

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah. It's that ensemble spirit that inspired us for this Chicago Acts Together campaign to bring together to the community and to extend that notion of a collaborative effort to the entire city in this moment. So we're grateful for our ensemble and the extended ensemble that is comprised of every single person who loves theater.

Dean Richards:

Yeah. I think it's great that they do that. Now, what's coming up in the future that we should know about?

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah. So we have the podcast dropping on the 18th. I'd say all of these education workshops are worth checking out. We are releasing some members only theatrical content, trying to stay close to those folks who subscribe and come out year round with us. So we have some upcoming announcements that I'm not allowed to talk about quite yet.

Dean Richards:

Oh, you can tell us.

Aaron Aptaker:

[crosstalk] That are really exciting digital art on the horizon.

Dean Richards:

You can tell us. That's okay. Nobody will mind if you spill the beans with us. That's all right.

Aaron Aptaker:

Absolutely. Well, the most exciting upcoming, I'll tell you a member's only event we have, The Seagulls, which we are adapting to open up our new building, which is opening next year. A sneak peak with the full cast that will actually be performing in the show, entirely ensemble, a stage reading of that adapted by our very own Yasen Peyankov.

Dean Richards:

Oh, wow. That is very exciting. What is, I mean, is it sort of a wait and see attitude of when the theater might be opening again? What the plans might be that when the theater opens again? Will we be coming to watch plays the way that we always did or will things be different? Will there be fewer audience

members? Will there be barriers between people to keep things safe? Do we know any of that?

Aaron Aptaker:

I think it's a great question. We need to remain adaptable right now and so Steppenwolf is planning to start our season in October. But like the whole industry, we're in a very early phase of a constantly evolving situation. So at Steppenwolf, we are in the fact-finding phase right now. We're in active conversations with local and state health officials. We're going to take cues from public officials and we're going to make sure that when we are welcoming audiences back to our spaces, that it's a safe, enjoyable experience. That that audience experience is as awesome as they are used to at Steppenwolf. And until we're able to welcome them back in person, we're so happy to be able to stay connected with our audiences through all of this fantastic digital work. The response to it so far has let us know that the community is right there with us.

Dean Richards:

Yeah. Well, it's great that there still is something for people to engage in. I'm just wondering, what the new normal is going to be for going to plays, for going to movies, for concerts, for how are we going to do this? I mean, if I come to see a play at Steppenwolf, where normally it would be a packed house, will there be two or three empty seats between people? Will there be, I've seen prototypes of theaters around the world where they're actually putting up plastic barriers between people to try to stop the spread of any potential virus. It's a very interesting time, isn't it, to be kind of part of this process of redefining how theater going is going to be?

Aaron Aptaker:

It is. All of society is going to be redefined by this. No one knows quite yet exactly what that's going to look like for the future and I think what's important is that we remain as flexible as possible. We are in no rush to know exactly what that finished picture looks like at Steppenwolf. We want to be as deliberate as possible in planning this out. So I'd imagine that when you go to the movies, the theater, to the grocery store, there will definitely be changes on the other side of this and we want to make sure that as we implement those, that we're being very thoughtful in the way that we do it. What does give me confidence, Dean, art is essential, so I know that when people are able to come back out, there is going to be a built-up hunger for people to commune and to see live art.

Dean Richards:

Yeah, that's going to be quite a phenomenon when people are able to go back into a theater, a live theater, movie theater, concert hall, whatever it is. People are dying so much for that experience now, that it's going to be very interesting to see how it's going to be received. And I have to give it to the theater community, concert venues, movie theaters, it's safety first. They're putting safety before profit. And I think that's something to be applauded, as well, that they want to make sure that it's safe, not only for the audience members, but for the people who work in the theaters, for the people who will be putting on performances. So I think it's very wise to take the time that you need to make sure that it's done right.

Dean Richards:

Aaron, give us the repeat on how we can get this amazing tee shirt that has become available, Chicago Acts Together tee shirt. One hundred percent of the proceeds benefit the Chicago Theater Workers Relief Fund. That's anybody that works in the Chicago theaters. A beautiful skyline logo on the front that says Chicago Acts Together and the names of all of the theaters that were participating when the actual tee shirts were made, 88 of them on the back right now, although there's more. How can people get these tee shirts?

Aaron Aptaker:

Yeah, absolutely. And just to say, everyone participating, even if they're signing on now, we're going to be adding their names to the tee shirt.

Dean Richards:
Oh great.

Aaron Aptaker:

We'll get everyone. You just have to go to steppenwolf.org. It's right on the homepage. If you want to find out what other companies are participating or help spread awareness for this, hashtag Chicago Acts Together. You can also check out all of our digital offerings, right on the homepage, steppenwolf.org. And the shirt is only available until May 19th. So it is a great chance to head online to steppenwolf.org and pick one up to support this awesome cause.

Dean Richards:

Yeah, support the theater community, get yourself a Chicago theater collector's item, really. Steppenwolf.org is the way to do that. Aaron Aptaker is the Audience Experience Director at Steppenwolf Theater Company. Pleasure to talk to you, Aaron, and I hope we see you in person sometime soon.

Aaron Aptaker:

Thank you so much for having me. I look forward to being the first to welcome you back at Steppenwolf.

Dean Richards:

I'll look forward to having that audience experience. I can't wait.