

From the Publisher: Show Business

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Playing Fields at Burlington High School

It takes confidence — and some marketing prowess — to convince a stranger to spend two hours in a dark room on the promise that the experience will be sufficiently entertaining. A long drive, and the cost of admission, dinner and a babysitter, may factor into the assessment of whether, in the end, it was worthwhile.

That's the basic challenge facing Vermont's performing arts presenters — the people who scour a worldwide cultural landscape in search of the beautiful, the moving and the mind-blowing. Once they find and book the right assortment of acts, their job is to convince us to quit the couch and go. Historically, local media helped. This week's Performing Arts Preview spotlights some of the most noteworthy shows coming to a venue near you.

I've been fascinated with this risky business since my first job out of college, at the fledgling Flynn Theatre in Burlington, provided a rare backstage view of it. The goal was to put together a "season" of shows, to which people would buy tickets in advance. "Subscribing" secured the best available seats for the customer and might also encourage them to try something new. It gave the organization a clear idea of how much marketing was required to sell what was left and the cash up front to pay for it.

Those days are over. Even before the pandemic, ticket buying had become increasingly last minute. And box office problems are quaint compared to what performing arts presenters have had to contend with for the past two years.

Now comes a new bunch of obstacles, including how to make performing arts venues as safe as possible for a maximum number of people. Decisions around protocols — whether to require masks, for example — will inevitably anger some portion of the theatergoing audience.

But the bigger summons, frankly, is getting people back in the habit of consuming culture. That is, gathering together to take a chance on someone else's art, with nary a TV remote in sight.

Flynn executive director Jay Wahl implored me to check out two of the theater's outdoor shows last week, and I did. The first, *Playing Fields* — held, appropriately, on the playing field at Burlington High School — started a little awkwardly. The band, Red Baraat, tried everything under the late afternoon sun to get the audience to move closer and dance to its Indian-flavored funk.

But all of that Yankee shyness fell away at dusk, when three stilt-walking Dutch artists dressed as giant skeletal birds strode onto the field. Accompanied by lights and sound, they were the most complex puppets I've ever seen. The kids, enthralled and terrified, chased the creatures, whose beaks bent down to touch them. It was beautiful, moving *and* mind-blowing — with an assist from the full moon.



"C'est pas là, c'est par là" at Art Hop

Paula Routly © Seven Days

The next night's show, "*C'est pas là, c'est par là* (It's Not That Way, It's This Way)," was even better. The audience arrived at a dark parking lot at the edge of the South End Art Hop to find a complex web of twine that South Korean-born artist Juhyung Lee had spent the prior two days weaving. Spotlit dramatically, the work was amazing enough. Then Lee appeared and offered multiple rope ends to members of the audience. Wordlessly, he made it clear that we should start spooling our line of twine into a ball, which required entering the web, stepping over and under still-fixed lines and, on occasion, working with other people.

There was no getting out of it. My significant other, our friend and I worked with the group to unravel the sculpture as if we were part of some supercool ropes course. Almost everyone was grinning with joy. By the time we reached the end of our respective lines, the balls of twine were heavy and hard to hold. We turned them over to Lee, who fashioned them into a pyramid and set it on fire. People sat together on the ground, watching the flames, as he slipped into the night.

You won't find that on Netflix.

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