

Questions are Raised as The University of Connecticut Shuts down the Sold Out Run of Play about Police Brutality

University of Connecticut Shuts Down the Sold Out Run of Play about Police Brutality for covid caution while in-person classes and sold out Athletic Events Proceed as Usual.



New York City, New York Dec 10, 2021 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - Even if you were fortunate enough to get a ticket to The Connecticut Repertory Theatre's sold-out run of *FOOD FOR THE GODS*, you won't be able to see it—all performances have been canceled. With the director given the condition to keep a portion of the play about police brutality and racialized violence from audience viewing— for covid cautions—and students still being permitted to attend in-person classes, and sold out sporting events, they have begun to question the real reasons for why this socially distanced and socio-political play has been canceled.

FOOD FOR THE GODS was slated to open this past Friday, with an already sold-out run. At the beginning of the opening week, a student from the show's cast tested positive for covid. To ensure safety for the cast and crew, the company decided to take a pause for the scheduled Wednesday and Thursday dress rehearsal and preview and to postpone Friday's opening night to ensure the remainder of the cast tested negative throughout the incubation period. Questions immediately began to surface regarding the university's testing policies, availability, and affordable access for student testing.

The play was originally scheduled to open in October of 2020 and was delayed to fall 2021 due to

covid. In the spring of this year, the director and student design team were presented with the challenge of mounting the audience-immersive production with all covid safety parameters in place. Kelly Daigneault, both scenic designer and lighting designer, rose to the task by designing an immersive set that would allow for 6 feet of social distancing throughout the show, and Sofia Perez, incorporated masks as a part of each of her costume designs, for the 15 person ensemble.

As the remainder of the cast tested negative for the week, on opening night, the company resumed with a refresher rehearsal without an audience. The show's Director was told the production would proceed with an audience on Saturday, as long as social distancing protocols could be implemented as a part of the show. The already approved socially distanced ground plans were presented to illustrate that all covid guidelines were followed and already built into the design of the production. Shortly after, in a puzzling turn of events, the show's director was next given the directive that the show would only be granted an audience if patrons were required to go immediately from the lobby directly to house seating. For a traditional play, that would not have been an unusual request. However, for the immersive production, this condition would mean prohibiting the entire second act of the play from being seen by the audience. It was a condition that the director could not agree to.

"A production that took 7 months to design and weeks to physically install—Lighting instruments, speaker placements, scenic builds-- cannot simply be redesigned within hours on opening night. In addition to that," Says director, Nehprie Amenii "the terms presented to me, to alter the play, would have been in direct violation to the script that was licensed."

The section of the play that audience members would have been prevented from viewing contained the stories of murdered black men and a listing of the names of "the 120 black people executed without trial, by police, security guards, and self-appointed law enforcers...January 1st - June 30th."

Upon declining the condition to alter the script, a new directive was shared stating:

"They are not satisfied that contact tracing has had sufficient time to operate. Therefore, we are not permitted to enable the *Food for the Gods* company to assemble today. There is no room for us to negotiate this directive, as medical advice." The theatre was locked. The actors were not permitted to gather.

The following day, the students received notice from Anne D'Alleva, dean of the School of Fine Arts, on behalf of Student Health and Wellness (SHaW) stating that in

"efforts to keep one another safe...all scheduled performances are canceled." And "At the same time, SHaW has advised us that there is no scientific or medical advice *against* continuing in-person classes and other in-person work."

The students of the show and dramatic arts department have begun to write letters in protest and are questioning the real reasons behind the production being suddenly shut down. Stating "this decision to cancel *is not* about covid." and that "things just aren't adding up." They are demanding answers to some of their questions being asked:

"Why is there such an aggressive response to one particular covid case, when the university has seen many since returning to in-person classes?"

"Why is it safe for the same students of the production to gather together for in-person class with one another but unsafe to gather to perform this show?"

“Why was the show canceled without first notifying the writer and director?”

“How is the University allowing gatherings of close to 10,000 spectators in a Basketball Arena, not to mention thousands of UConn’s very own students—to be not socially distanced and unmasked? But won’t allow a masked performance with a limited audience of 24 people to attend a socially distanced performance?”

One student went as far as creating a petition at change.org demanding fair treatment.

The student petition can be found [here](#).

This production had already experienced questionable events prior to the run being canceled. One example being, the director's personal property suddenly disappearing from the theatre, and the student actors having to lock and hide their performance items, in concern for the safety of the show.

As a result of student advocacy, the school is considering giving the production permission to resume--but only for faculty and classmates--no public performances of *Food For the Gods* will be shown.

CRT’s *food for the God’s* was reimagined by a talented team of student designers: powerful choreography by Kiera Prusmack, striking costume design by Karla Sofia Perez Sound design by Elizabeth Shaul, and masterful scenic and Lighting Design by

Kelly Daigneault. Props were beautifully created by Aubrey Ellis. Puppet design and fabrication by Kunzika and Nehpriei Amenii, and the students of the UCONN puppet lab. Assistant Direction by Will Jenkins and Mackenzie Doss, who also doubled as projection designer. Dramaturgy by Holly Richmond. Original scenic Engineering Designs by Enoch Reise were masterfully enhanced by CRT’s Technical Director David Ash, With professional Production Stage Management by Tom Kosis and dialect coach Julie Foe.

The show was to be performed by a compelling student-cast that featured, Casey Wortham, Kiera Prusmack, Zoe Eklund, and Tony King along with a dynamic ensemble that doubles as actors and puppeteers: Nyree Pajaro, Alyson Doyle, Matteo Villanueva, Anthony Stellitto, Robert Liniak, Eliza Carson, April Lichtman, Andre Chan, Yanniv Frank, Paul Flores, Jim Jiang, and as well as a company of powerful understudies that include Nicholas Luberto, Abigail Hilditch, and Briana Bellinger-Dawson

Food for the Gods had its world premier at the Tony Award Winning La Mama Experimental Theatre, in 2018. The play was first presented at Sarah Lawrence College and then at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

Nehpriei Amenii is a Brooklyn-based writer, director, puppeteer, and artistic director of **Khunum Productions** -- a platform for creative anthropology, that employs visual theatre to promote human connectivity. For more information about Khunum Productions and *Food for the Gods*, visit khunumproductions.com.

ABOUT CONNECTICUT REPERTORY THEATRE

Connecticut Repertory Theatre is the producing arm of the University of Connecticut’s Department of

Dramatic Arts. CRT produces under a year-round contract with the Actors' Equity Association and serves as a cultural center for Connecticut and the New England region. CRT productions are directed, designed by, and cast with visiting professional artists, including Equity actors, faculty members, and the department's most advanced student artists. CRT operates on the belief that the synergy between professional and advanced student artists creates a unique learning environment for the development of extraordinary theatre. CRT is also the performance outlet for the Department of Dramatic Art's internationally acclaimed Puppet Arts program, the only degree-conferring puppetry program of its kind in the United States.

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info@khunumproductions.com

Media Contact

Khunum Productions/ Melissa Washington

info@khunumproductions.com

973-910-8482

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