

Relocated, but not displaced

Bats in the Brooks Center for the Performing Arts

By Eric J. Lapin, Ashley Cooper, Bryce Payne, and Reagan Thompson

In the Spring of both 2018 and 2019 bats moved into the main theater space of the Brooks Center for the Performing Arts at Clemson University. Clemson University is located in the northwest of South Carolina in the southern United States. Being in a rural area, wildlife is not uncommon to our campus. Deer, opossum, skunks, rabbits, and even black bears share the campus and surrounding areas. The Brooks Center functions as the primary performing arts venue on campus and in the community, and the 968 seat proscenium theater hosts professional touring roadshows, student ensembles and productions, and campus events like doctoral hoodings and guest speakers. All of these activities were disrupted by the arrival of an estimated 1000 Mexican free-tailed bats in 2018. With food resources readily available outside the theater and seclusion in the upper reaches of the balcony and fly loft, the Brooks Center made for a perfect habitat for the bats. The removal of these protected mammals brought significant challenges and disruptions, but also offered many opportunities to test and refine safety procedures, enhance patron communication, and engage with the local community.

Getting rid of bats as tiny as a mouse

After the initial shock, teams moved into action to handle the situation. As a performing arts center that is part of a major university's campus, there were additional responsibilities to consider, like the need to look out for the students that attend classes in the Brooks Center and may be otherwise unaware of the new hazard. With no prior experience in wildlife or pest management, the first step the Brooks Center leadership team took was to seal off the areas where bats had been spotted, in hopes of containing the issue and minimizing restructuring of classes, rehearsals, and performances. At the same time, immediate contacts were made to the office of University Facilities which manages pest control for the university. The hallway behind the theatre, the dressing rooms below the stage, and the lobby of the main theatre were all

locked and required building keys to access. When a bat was spotted in a new area, as some were later seen in the adjacent Blackbox Theatre, the new zone was also shut down. All room closures were paired with updates regarding the handling of the bat situation by university employees. To remove the bats, an excluder device was used to allow the bats to exit the space and not be able to return. As Mexican free-tailed bats can enter through any space larger than a $\frac{3}{8}$ inch (about one centimeter), the excluder device was only marginally effective. Facilities and pest control then worked to trap and relocate the animals. Mexican free-tailed bats are a protected species and vital to our area's ecosystem. Therefore, gassing, killing, or otherwise harming the bats was never an option. At no point was anyone other than facilities and pest control to remove, harm, or even touch the bats. This was for their safety, and for the safety of the bats. This information was constantly shared with students, faculty, and staff through building signage and email communication. As always, the wellbeing of students, faculty, and staff came before any other concern.

In order to keep the people in our building safe, the containment and removal of the bats was a first priority. As a small part in a much larger organization, we function within the organizational structure of the University. Because the bats affected the entire building, Brooks leadership did not have autonomy over the situation and was responsible for notifying University Facilities Management.

Holding on to the core mission

While this lack of agency was oftentimes frustrating, it allowed Brooks Center staff to focus on other responsibilities. We understood throughout the process that even in moments of crisis, we still have a mission to present



Brooks Center for the Performing Arts at Clemson University, South Carolina © Clemson University.

outstanding artists and performances. In order to fulfil this mission, the challenge became determining if and where we could relocate the performances to other venues in the area. Once the problem was identified and the decision was made to relocate as many shows as possible the entire team mobilized. While it was an incredibly difficult challenge to find performance spaces in the community for student ensemble concerts, children's educational shows, and touring productions all with a wide variety of production and technical requirements, it was important to continue to serve the theater, arts, and educational needs of our community.

With the return of the bats in 2019, the Brooks Center was better prepared for another round of intrusion. Once again, most of the battle was finding a space that fits the specifications of each relocated production. Thankfully, only one performance had to be cancelled because there was no other venue in the area that matched the Brooks Center's capacity. All other shows were able to be relocated to other venues. Clear plans were developed during the initial infestation to quickly and smoothly transition from one space to another. These plans included vehicle rental procedures, appropriate carrying systems, and insurance coverage on our equipment and student workers. Items like a mobile hotspot and equipment to set up a productive mobile box office were also purchased to ensure box office and patron services procedures at the new venues would not be further disrupted.

Focusing on the chances

One positive outcome of these relocations was the increased community and patron engagement. Having the bats forced us outside of ourselves and caused us to engage with organizations that have venues we could possibly



*Bat Excluder Device
© Brooks Center for
the Performing Arts
(left).*

*Facilities Sealing ©
Brooks Center for
the Performing Arts
(right).*

use. This was an important reminder that intentional relationships with other organizations within our community benefit everyone. As a performing arts center on a university campus we are lucky to be able to build upon the relationships fostered by the Performing Arts faculty. Along with the added credential of the University's name on our badges, a month's worth of canceled shows were able to be smoothly relocated with limited cancellations. Today, we know that for students and inexperienced theater-goers, attending a performance at the Brooks Center can be scary and intimidating to new patrons. However, with these relocated performances being held in more familiar community venues, it gave us the opportunity to begin new patron relationships that will potentially lead to their attendance at shows in our main theater space.

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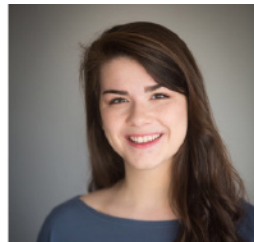
While we are always trying to grow our audience base, we also want to make sure that we are nurturing the relationships we already have. In a digital age where much of our communication is conducted via email and social media, we know that for some patrons this is a barrier. In order to combat this issue, when performances had to be moved, Brooks Center staff and students personally phoned each ticket holder for that event to ensure they knew of the relocation and to answer any questions. Some phone calls were short, and some went right to voicemail, but there were many patrons who were thrilled about the call and wanted to chat. This provided us a unique and unexpected opportunity to connect with the patrons and see how they were doing while providing essential show information and answering questions.

The Brooks Center, like all arts organizations, prepares thoroughly for the artistic, educational, and technical aspects of our performances. Any wildlife or pest infestation dramatically disrupts these carefully constructed plans. The arrival of the bats in the theater space reminded us of the importance of our emergency management procedures and communication plan. By practicing and refining these procedures, we are better equipped to fulfill our artistic and educational mission while ensuring the safety of patrons, students, and staff. Perhaps most importantly, by treating the crisis as an opportunity, we were able to develop stronger relationships with our surrounding commu-

nity and existing patron base. While the personal touch of patron communication and the relocation of shows was difficult, our relationships with our audience and community partners is stronger than ever. We do not wish to welcome the bats back into our theater spaces in the future, but the Brooks Center for the Performing Arts is a stronger organization because of them.



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