

## NSSRA actors eager to perform 'I, Phone for crowds after cancellation



*Actors and companions in the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association's Bright Star Theatre Company pose for a photo during rehearsals for "I, Phone." Performances were canceled just days before they were scheduled due to the spread of the coronavirus in Illinois. Photo courtesy of NSSRA. Photo Submitted.*

Jason Addy, Contributing Editor  
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As schools and businesses began to close to limit the spread of the coronavirus, Bright Star Theatre Company director Julie Gibson Lay knew the writing was on the wall for the troupe's upcoming performances.

Actors, crew members and companions from the Bright Star Theatre Company were preparing for their second dress rehearsal for "I, Phone" on Thursday, March 12, when officials made the difficult decision to cancel performances scheduled for that weekend.

Like all "nonessential" services and events in the state of Illinois, the group's performances are on hold indefinitely, but Gibson Lay said she will do everything she can to make sure the actors are given the chance "they deserve to be standing in front of a wildly applauding audience."

“We’re still hoping, when everything calms down a little bit, to reschedule,” said Gibson Lay, of Northbrook. “It’s something that’s supposed to be seen.”

The Bright Star Theatre Company, a program produced by the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association in partnership with the Northbrook Park District, provides a platform for special-needs actors “to show that they’re capable of fully participating in a complicated and mainstream activity” and an opportunity “to be recognized by their family and community,” Gibson Lay said.

“It really gives an opportunity for actors to show what they can do and not so much focus on what they can’t do,” Gibson Lay said.

The cast of “I, Phone” features 10 actors, including three from Glenview: Katie Baeckelandt (as Virginia Mobile), Maggie Johnson (as Gal X E) and Lisa Krupinski (as Eleanor Gleason, a.k.a. Elle G). The actors are supported by companions from a number of local high schools, including Glenbrook South and Glenbrook North.

The performances of “I, Phone” were due to be Johnson’s first with the Bright Star Theatre Company, despite having more than three decades of stage experience. Krupinski has performed with the troupe for nine years, and Baeckelandt has been with them for four years.

The original musical transports audiences to the 22nd century when humans serve phones. It opens with a Shakespearean actor — who is half-phone, half-human — having an existential crisis. That is followed soon after by a rainstorm that destroys the phones’ chargers and forces humans to consider what they will do without their technology, Gibson Lay said.

Throughout the story, the characters face challenges trying to be “normal” people, such as having to re-learn how to cry and what to do with their free time without access to technology — a challenge that many in the 21st century also struggle with.

“I, Phone” was co-written by Gibson Lay and Joan Matthews, also of Northbrook. They were assisted on the production by Gibson Lay’s son and husband and Matthews’ daughter.

In past years, the Bright Star Theatre Company produced many shows adapted from fairy tales, but Gibson Lay and Matthews wanted to create a script that the actors could more easily relate to. That led them last year to write “The Hive,” a script written specifically for the Bright Star actors.

Audiences raved about “The Hive,” leading Gibson Lay and Matthews to write another play for the Bright Star cast.

“In their minds, they’re teenagers and adults, and they don’t consider themselves to be kids,” Gibson Lay said. “So we really need shows that are more meaningful to them and more relevant to where they see themselves.”

Bright Star Theatre Company spent about six months rehearsing “I, Phone” before performances were called off this month, and Gibson Lay is determined to put their hard work in front of an audience.

“They are super proud of themselves for their work, as they should be because they are magnificent. They are absolutely magnificent,” Gibson Lay said. “We really need to figure out a way to get them in front of an audience again because they deserve it; they’ve worked so hard.”