

# spotlight

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY THEATRE

WINTER 2024-25 \$5.00

## IN THIS ISSUE

**AACTFest 2025**

**AACT YouthFest 2025**

**AACT NewPlayFest  
*Three World Premieres***

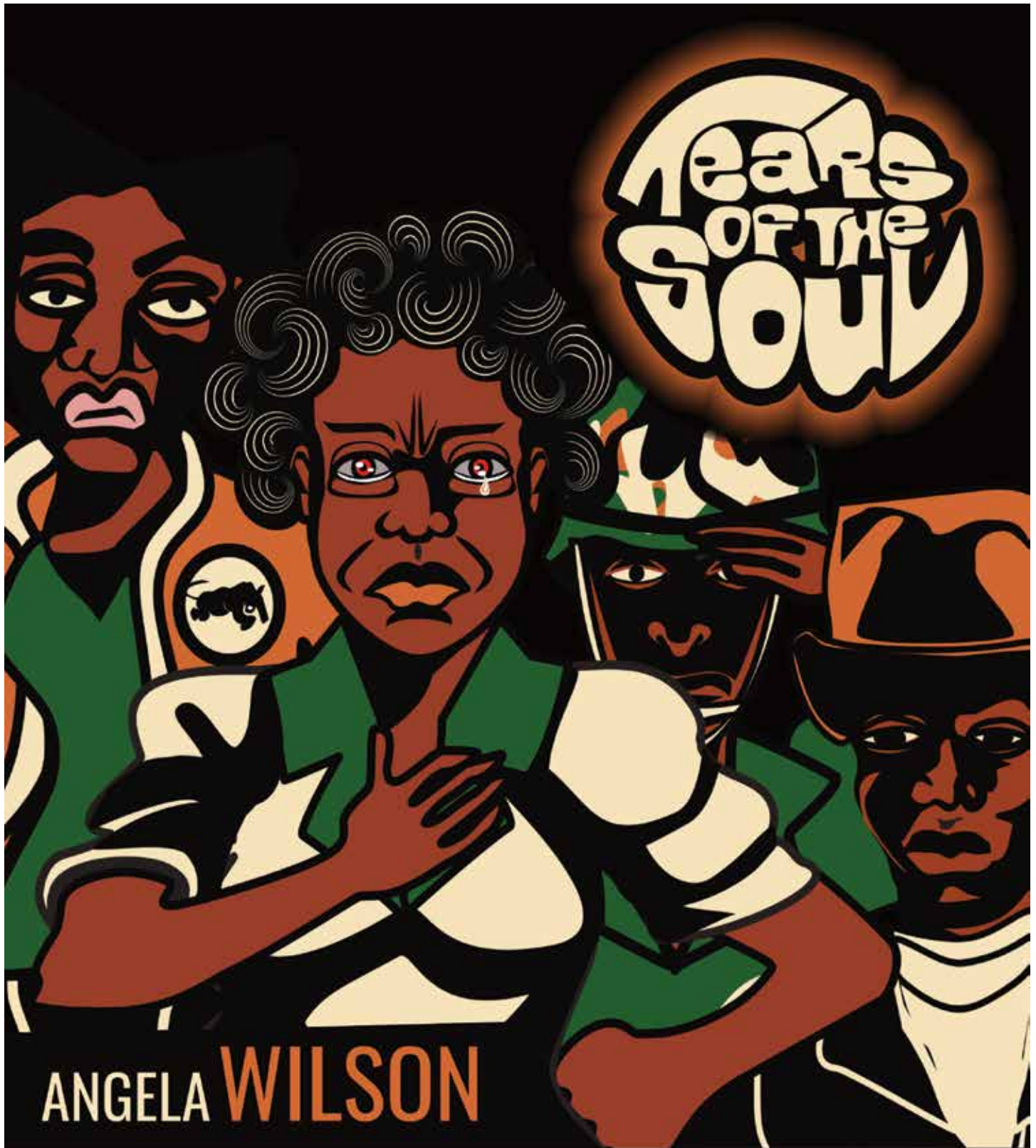
**Effective Show Promotion**

***A Tradition of Fiddler on the Roof***

**From Community Theatre to Broadway**

***An Interview with Julie Benko***





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## President's Letter

**Kristofer Geddie**

AACT President

### Gratitude

It's that time of year when we begin to reflect on the previous months and think about the things for which we are grateful. In many theatres, it's also when we are gearing up for a full season of shows or an annual fundraising campaign.

This year, we were also on the edge of our seats for a monumental election. By the time you read this, we should know who our next president will be. Politics aside, one way or another, we will all change. (I, for one, will be so happy that the endless text messages have stopped.)

Looking back over the year, I am grateful for the escape that theatre has offered, and the opportunities AACT has afforded me, as well. Sitting in a theatre, being drawn into another world, another story, is a joy I could never experience sitting on my couch. I recently had the privilege of attending the Liverpool International Theatre Festival, and what a joy it was. The days were incredible, whether it was watching the heartfelt emotional roller coaster of *Arthur & Marigold*, the exhilarating ride through space in *Dull Space*, or the beautiful frenzy of *Sweet Addictions*—it was cathartic.

Throughout the festival I was reminded of a beautiful line in the musical, *Come from Away*: "STFD" (For purposes here, I'll just say, "Slow Down"). Because I slowed down to fully appreciate my gratitude for

the festival, the beautiful surroundings, and the fellowship with theatre people from around the world. I am so grateful for it. During this season of gratitude, I hope you, too, will take a moment to enjoy the theatres in your community, invest in the storytelling, and let yourself be drawn into the show. Spend some time with nature. In other words, STFD!

And, if you are feeling a sense of gratitude to AACT, please remember AACT in this season of giving. Consider a donation to help amplify the wonderful program and services we have come to love: [aact.org/donations](https://aact.org/donations).

I look forward to seeing you on the New York Adventure and in Des Moines at AACTFest 2025.

Wishing you and yours all the best!

Thank you for being you,

Kris

**Camille PLAYHOUSE**  
**61st Season**

Play	Run Dates
<b>INTO THE WOODS</b> "Come upon a time..."	SEP. 13, 14, 15, 20, 21, 22
<b>the CRUCIBLE</b> "Then that will not confess will hang"	OCT. 18, 19, 20, 25, 26, 27
<b>A Christmas Carol</b> "God bless us every one!"	DEC. 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15
<b>Oklahoma!</b> "I got a beautiful feeling, everything's goin' my way"	JAN. 31 & FEB. 1, 2, 7, 8, 9
<b>Tartuffe</b> "I am all amazed, befuddled, and befuddled"	FEB. 28 & MAR. 1, 2, 7, 8, 9
<b>DISASTER!</b> "Earthquake? Tidal Waves? Don't matter, we are survivors!"	APR. 11, 12, 13, 25, 26, 27
<b>SHE KILLS MONSTERS</b> "Every adventurer has a party. This one's mine. Cue the intro music!"	MAY 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25

Scan for more info!

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AACT welcomes *Spotlight* input and requests for advertising rates. Contact David Cockerell at [david@aact.org](mailto:david@aact.org) to submit content. Contact Andy Snyder at [advertising@aact.org](mailto:advertising@aact.org) or visit [aact.org/advertise](http://aact.org/advertise) for advertising rates and specs.

**On the cover:** Mark Allen (left) and Kim Fairbairn (right) star as Hank and Bertha Dunwiddie in the AACT NewPlayFest world premiere of Kim E. Ruyle's award-winning Tennessee Wet Rub, at Cottage Theatre in Cottage Grove, Oregon. Photo by Matt Emrich.

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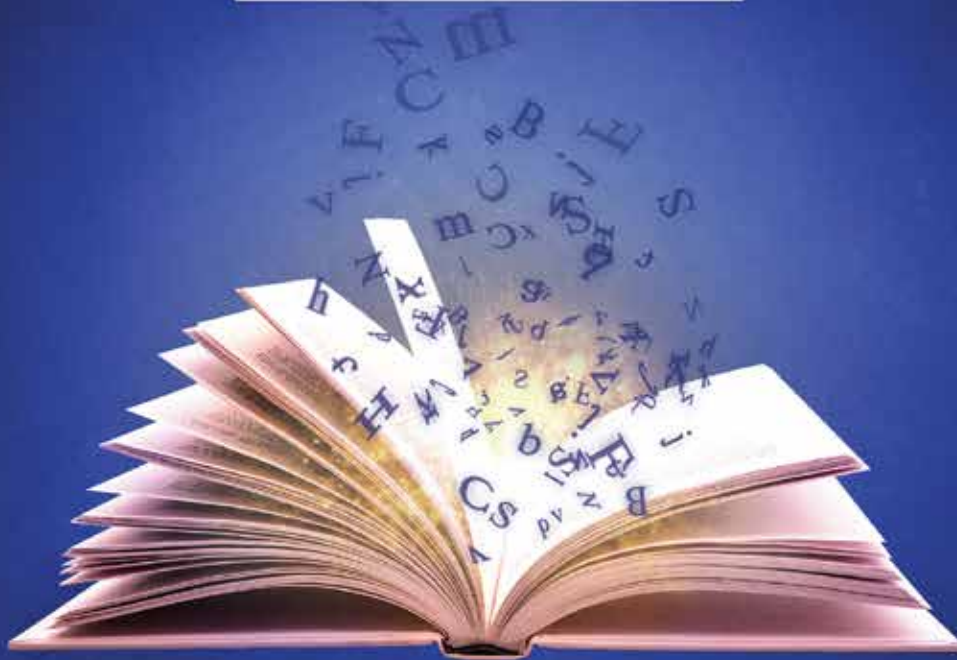
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## Spotlight

*Spotlight* is published quarterly by the American Association of Community Theatre for its members, and is annually distributed to an expanded list of known community theatre organizations and interested individuals.

**Spotlight Editors:** David Cockerell and Stephen Peithman

**Spotlight Editorial Team:** Quiana Clark-Roland, Michael Cochran, Mary Doveton, Kristofer Geddie, Jon Montgomery, Stephen Peithman, Katrina Ploof, Dorinda Toner, Lou Ursone, David A. VanCleave

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## Upcoming Events

**AACT Member Roundtables**  
[aact.org/roundtables](http://aact.org/roundtables)

**AACT Virtual Masterclasses**  
Pissing People Off For Profit (and Fun!)  
Thursday, February 6, 2025  
*Presented by Eric Seale, Artistic Director Hickory Theatre*  
[aact.org/masterclass](http://aact.org/masterclass)

**AACT Industry Connections**  
[aact.org/ic](http://aact.org/ic)

**State and National Arts Advocacy Summits**  
Dates vary  
[americansforthearts.org](http://americansforthearts.org)

**AACT NYC Theatre Adventure!**  
February 20-22, 2025  
New York City, New York  
[aact.org/nyc](http://aact.org/nyc)

**AACT Executive Committee and Board of Directors Meeting**  
February 22, 2025  
New York City, New York

**World Theatre Day 2025**  
March 27  
[world-theatre-day.org](http://world-theatre-day.org)

**AACT Adjudication Seminar**  
Virtual: April 26-June 7  
In-Person (Des Moines, Iowa): June 25-28  
[aact.org/seminar](http://aact.org/seminar)

**AACT Community Theatre Management Conference (CTMC)**  
June 22-24  
Des Moines, Iowa  
[aact.org/ctmc](http://aact.org/ctmc)

**AACT YouthFest 2025**  
June 22-25  
Des Moines, Iowa  
[aact.org/youthfest](http://aact.org/youthfest)

**AACT Summer Board/Committee Meetings and AACTFest 2025**  
June 24-28  
Des Moines, Iowa  
[aact.org/25](http://aact.org/25)

**Design and Layout:** Jim Covault  
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# Countdown to AACTFest 2025!

## Join Us and Celebrate Community Theatre

### June 25-28, 2025



Don't miss out on the premier national community theatre event! AACTFest 2025 will take place in Des Moines, Iowa, from June 25-28, 2025. Whether you attend for a single day or the entire week, this is your chance to meet and network with community theatre professionals and enthusiasts from across the country.

AACTFest 2025 promises to celebrate artistic excellence, ingenuity, and foster discussions on the challenges and triumphs of running a community theatre. It's a unique opportunity to expand your network of colleagues and advocates, while exploring the creative possibilities of theatre.

While virtual connections like Zoom and chat have brought us closer, nothing compares to the energy and impact of gathering in person. As theatre-makers, we know the profound value of being in the same space, exchanging ideas, and collaborating face-to-face.

#### Don't miss out! Register now before the discount deadlines expire!

Your festival registration includes:

- Tickets to all 12 AACTFest performances
- Access to sought-after workshops
- Keynote presentations
- Exhibitor booths and giveaways
- One entry in the Design Competition
- Access to both virtual and onsite Design Competition displays
- Awards show and social events

For a list of the theatre companies advancing from regional festivals to AACTFest 2025, visit the "Moving On" section at [aact.org/25](http://aact.org/25). Stay updated on upcoming state and regional festivals via the AACT Calendar at [aact.org/calendar](http://aact.org/calendar).

Festival offerings have limited capacity, so we encourage early registration to ensure you don't miss any of the fun, excitement, and stellar theatre that only AACTFest can provide. Significant hotel and travel discounts are available to attendees! Find all registration details at [aact.org/25](http://aact.org/25).

#### VIP Package

Limited Availability Through March 1, 2025

Rate: \$550

Enhance your AACTFest experience with the VIP Package! This exclusive offering includes:

- Full registration for all AACTFest activities
- AACTFest welcome gift package
- Reserved seating for all 12 shows
- Early hotel reservations at the Festival Hotel (Marriott Downtown Des Moines)
- Access to a VIP-only special event

#### Registration Rates

Dates	AACT Member	Non-Member
<b>Early Bird</b> 9/1/24 - 3/1/25	\$325	\$400
<b>Advance</b> 3/2/25 - 5/31/25	\$425	\$510
<b>Onsite</b> 6/1/25 - 6/28/25	\$500	\$595
<b>VIP Festival Package</b> Limited availability through 3/1/25	\$550	

#### AACTFest Add-ons & Discounts

- **Adjudication Seminar**  
Limited to 15 participants: \$150  
This intensive seminar, held before and during AACTFest, provides hands-on adjudication training. Registration for AACTFest 2025 is required.
- **Adult Monologue Competition**  
Entry Fee: \$25  
Participants must register for the competition when registering for AACTFest. Youth and adult divisions are available, with limited spots. Early registration is encouraged.
- **Design Competition**
  - Onsite Display: First entry is free with AACTFest registration. Additional entries are \$25 each.
  - Virtual Entry: \$50

This competition showcases the best of community theatre design across five categories: Scenic, Lighting, Properties, Costume, and Special Design. Cash prizes will be awarded.
- **Saturday Awards**  
Available after May 1, 2025 to those not registered for the entire Festival.

For any changes to your registration or to add an option, contact Registrar Karen Matheny at [info@aact.org](mailto:info@aact.org) or 817-732-3177 x2.

#### Accessibility & Refund Policy

AACT is committed to ensuring accessibility for all attendees. If you have any accessibility-related needs, please email [info@aact.org](mailto:info@aact.org), and we will do our best to accommodate you.

For refund requests, a 20% cancellation fee applies. Transfer/substitution requests are welcome through June 7, 2025. Refund requests must be submitted in writing by May 31, 2025. Contact Registrar Karen Matheny for any inquiries regarding transfers or refunds at [karen@aact.org](mailto:karen@aact.org).



# AACTFest 2025 Adjudicators

The 2025 National AACTFest will feature experienced and nationally known adjudicators, whose comments on festival productions will be a learning experience for all participating company and audience members.



**Gary Anderson** is Producing Artistic Director of the Plowshares Theatre Company, in Detroit, Michigan. A 2016 Kresge Artist Fellow, he is a member of the National Advisory Committee of the Black Seed, a first-ever national strategic plan to create impact for Black theater institutions. Throughout his career, he has worked with such well-known playwrights as Charles "Oyamo" Gordon, Ron Milner, and August Wilson, as well as producer Woodie King, Jr., and actresses Denise Nicholas, Ella

Joyce, and Stephanie Mills. As a director, Anderson has worked in Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, and Houston. He is the recipient of multiple awards, including the Alain Locke Cultural Arts Award from The Friends of African and African American Art, Detroit Institute of Arts; Publisher's Award for Excellence - Between the Lines' Oscar Wilde Awards; the 2002 Michiganian of the Year Award from the *Detroit News*; and The Lawrence DeVine Award for Outstanding Contribution from the *Detroit Free Press*. In addition, Anderson has served on the board of several local and national theatre organizations, including CultureSource (Michigan), from 2007-2012; Black Theatre Network (BTN), from 1990-1994 and 2018-present; Theatre Communications Group (TCG), from 2000-2006; and the National Conference on African American Theatre (NCAAT), from 1991-1992.



**Katrina Ploof** has been a "theatre kid" for her entire life. The daughter of a music teacher and a vocalist, she was raised in the Great State of Maine, where she began her career working the summer stock circuit throughout New England. Mentored and supported by a parade of inspiring drama and music educators, trusted by executive and artistic directors who believed in giving her a chance, and blessed with what she terms "an incredible amount of luck,"

Ploof enjoyed an extensive acting career touring the U.S. and Canada for more than 20 years. She was bit by the directing bug sometime in the late 1980s, and since then has directed more than 200 plays, musicals, readings and concerts. As a playwright, she has collaborated on adaptations of works by Charles Dickens and Kenneth Graham, and an original work about the travels of an extraordinary giraffe who became the first resident of the Paris Zoo. Ploof is also a private acting coach and teacher, working with students all over the country. She has served as a theatre festival adjudicator throughout the U.S. and Canada since 1995. When she isn't in a theatre, you can find her cooking for friends and hanging with her much-loved terrier pup, Talley. (Yes, he is indeed named after the play you may be thinking of.) Katrina is grateful beyond measure for all that she has learned from her association with AACT and its members, and feels honored to serve as an adjudicator for AACTFest 2025.

continued on page 10 ▶

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**Chris Rich** is the design and management partner in Heliotrope Productions with playwright and performer Megan Gogerty. His daily work is as a freelance theatrical fabricator and designer, working in the IC Corridor of Eastern Iowa. He has worked in fabrication with Theatre Cedar Rapids in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, since 2018. A former Production Manager and Technical Director for Riverside Theatre in Iowa City, Iowa, he also served the theatre as a freelance scenic designer, technical director, lighting designer, scenic designer, and sound designer. From 2001 to 2018, Rich was Associate Professor of Design Technology and Program Director at Troy University. Recent credits include *Chipmunk'd*, *How I Learned What I Learned*, *Men On Boats*, *Stages*, *FEAST*, *Oh, Auctioneer!* and the upcoming *Fair State*.



**Kimberly Frick-Welker** (*Alternate Adjudicator*) has been actively involved in theatre for 43 years as a director, actor, techie, and an AACT adjudicator for state and regional festivals. She is the Cultural Arts Coordinator at Cookeville Performing Arts Center in Tennessee, her theatre home since 2006. Frick-Welker received her early training in Illinois under the direction of Dr. Archibald McLeod of Southern Illinois University's McLeod Theatre, where she served on the Board of Directors of The Stage Company for six years, and as Co-Founder/Artistic Director of the A.C.T. Inc., receiving the John A. Logan College Pacesetter Award for her dedication to bringing theatre to underserved communities including rural schools, libraries, and migrant camps. In Tennessee, she served on the Tennessee Theatre Association Board of Directors for eight years, and as guest Artistic Director for Cookeville High School's Fine Arts Department for six years. She has been honored by the Tennessee Theatre Association and Southeastern Theatre Association (SETC) for her work as a director and actor.

## Exhibitors: Reach a National Audience

Get ready to showcase your company's products and services at AACTFest 2025! This national community theatre festival in Des Moines, Iowa, from June 25-28, 2025, is a prime opportunity to reach theatre companies and artists from across the U.S. and even U.S. Military Services overseas.

With exhibitor space at the Des Moines Marriott Downtown, just five miles from the DSM airport and a short walk from the historic Hoyt Sherman Place Theatre, your brand will be in the center of the action. As participants gather for workshops, meetings, and the Design Competition, you'll have the perfect platform to interact directly with festival goers.

### Why Exhibit at AACTFest 2025?

This is your chance to connect with community theatres, professionals, and decision-makers who are looking for products, services, and resources that will enhance their theatre experiences. Past exhibitors have praised the high engagement levels, and with this year's festival shaping up to be the largest ever, you don't want to miss out on this prime opportunity.

### Your Exhibit Package Includes:

- 10' x 8' space with a 6' skirted display table
- Two chairs and a wastebasket
- Draped 8' back wall and 3' side rails

- Booth ID sign
- A virtual booth within the festival app
- Admission to all 12 festival productions
- Full attendee list two weeks prior to the event

And that's not all. Your booth will be located right next to the workshops and Design Competition, meaning consistent foot traffic throughout the festival.

### Exhibit Hall Hours:

- Thursday, June 26-Saturday, June 28: 8:00 am-12:30 pm

### Secure Your Spot – Space is Limited!

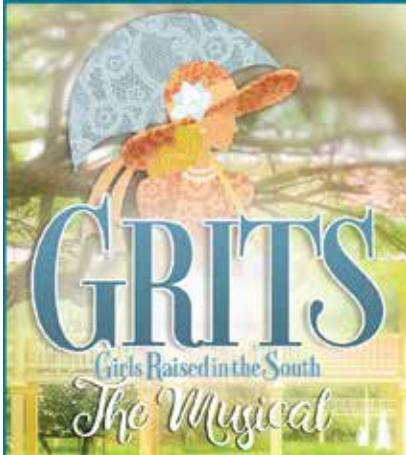
Exhibitor spots are filling up quickly, and space is assigned on a first-come, first-served basis. Reserve your spot today for just \$550 and get ready to make lasting connections with theatre professionals from around the country.

To learn more and reserve your exhibit space, visit [aact.org/exhibitors](http://aact.org/exhibitors).

## Advertise in the AACTFest 2025 Program

Advertising in the AACTFest 2025 Program also offers a unique opportunity to connect with hundreds of festival attendees. The Souvenir Program is distributed to every registered attendee, putting your brand front and center with a passionate, arts-focused audience. [aact.org/aactfest-advertising](http://aact.org/aactfest-advertising)

AACTFest 2025 continued on page 12 ►



**A hilarious musical snapshot  
of the south by Erica Allen McGee!**

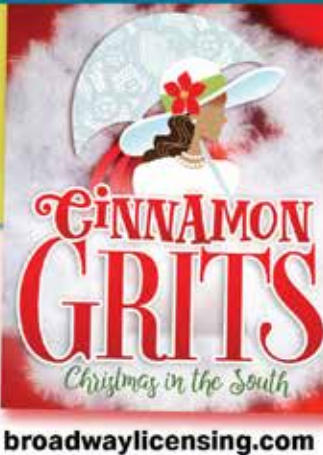
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# The Kite Runner

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Adapted by  
**Matthew Spangler**

Based on the best-selling novel by  
**Khaled Hosseini**



[www.dramaticpublishing.com/the-kite-runner](http://www.dramaticpublishing.com/the-kite-runner)

# Donations Sought for Silent Auction

You can play an important role in one of the highlights of AACTFest 2025—the Silent Auction, running from June 25–29, 2025.

Proceeds go directly to the AACT Endowment Festival Support Fund, which helps theatre companies from across the country travel to represent their regions at the national festival. By donating items for the auction, you'll help ensure that these incredible groups can share their talents on the national stage, while also sustaining the mission and longevity of AACT.

## How You Can Help

We are looking for exciting, high-quality items to feature in the Silent Auction. Think big! Unique experiences, fine jewelry, gourmet treats, artwork, or services—these are just a few ideas that could steal the spotlight and drive competitive bidding.

### We're Looking For:

- Fine jewelry and luxury items
- Gourmet candies, chocolates, or specialty goods from your state or region
- Exclusive experiences, destination packages, or entertainment passes
- Gift cards to national chains like restaurants, stores, or Amazon
- High-quality services or expert-led training
- Or surprise us with something that's truly extraordinary!

## How to Contribute

Visit [aact.org/silent-auction](https://aact.org/silent-auction) to fill out the Auction Contribution Form, or send an email to [info@aact.org](mailto:info@aact.org) with the following information:

- Description of your items
- Estimated value of single items, or group of items
- How you plan to deliver them (shipping or in-person drop-off)
- Expected arrival date

### Important Dates:

Contributions and descriptions must be submitted by **June 14, 2025**.

### Questions?

If you need more information, contact the AACT office at 817-732-3177 or [info@aact.org](mailto:info@aact.org).

By donating, you're making a profound impact on the future of American community theatre. AACTFest 2025 is a celebration of creativity, community, and the arts, and with your help, we can ensure it remains a vital part of the national cultural landscape. Join us in supporting the heart and soul of theatre in America.

Remember, your donations are tax-deductible. Every contribution helps community theatre thrive!

*Thank you for supporting the AACT Endowment Fund.*

# AACTFest Design Competition

Now's the time for designers and technicians to begin planning to showcase their art in the 2025 AACTFest Design Competition.

Begin now to gather up your plans, pictures, and other supporting materials to share with the AACT community—whether virtually or in person, at AACTFest 2025, in Des Moines, Iowa.

A new Design Competition Committee will be guiding this event through 2025, and into the future. The committee is also exploring ways to invigorate the onsite exhibition in Des Moines to better display the

artistry and skill involved in theatrical design. Details will be available soon.

### Design Competition Entry Fees

- Onsite Design Entry Fee: Free with AACT Registration.
  - Additional Entries are \$25 per entry.
- Virtual Design Entry Fee: \$50

The AACT 2025 National Design Competition showcases the best of community theatre in this country. It is an opportunity for your theatre and designers to shine. AACT-member theatres and their designers may enter designs for projects. There will be five design categories: Scenic, Lighting, Properties, Costume, and Special Design. Cash prizes for top designs in each category.

### Plan Now

It's not too early to begin collecting sketches, photos, plans, and other materials that can be used in your entry. *Entry forms will be available soon; deadline for submitting the form will be May 19, 2025.* Space allocation for in-person displays is limited, and entries will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.

### Awards

AACT will award a \$300 prize to the design chosen as Outstanding Overall Design. Awards will be given at the discretion of the adjudicators. Awards will be presented to the combined pool of On-Site and Virtual entries. Competition adjudicators also have the option of awarding prizes of \$100 for Outstanding Design in each of the five categories.

To learn more and register visit [aact.org/design25](https://aact.org/design25).

We want to see your work!





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Los Angeles Times



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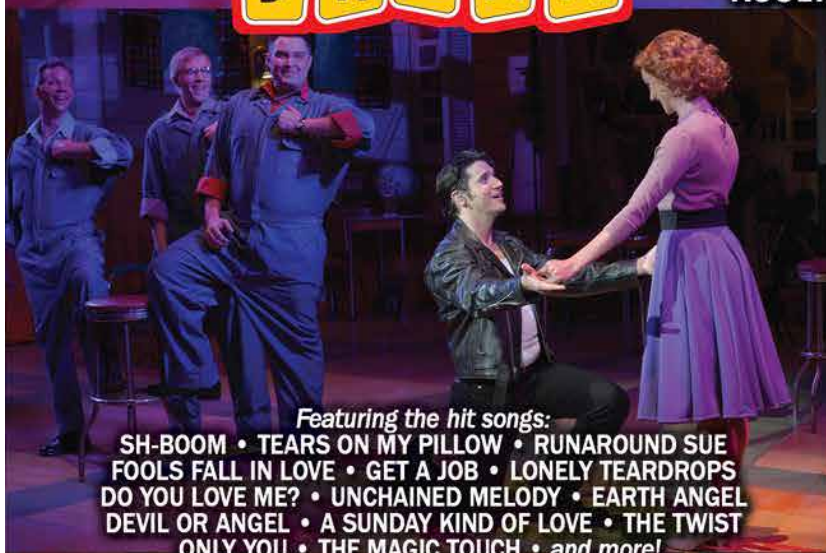


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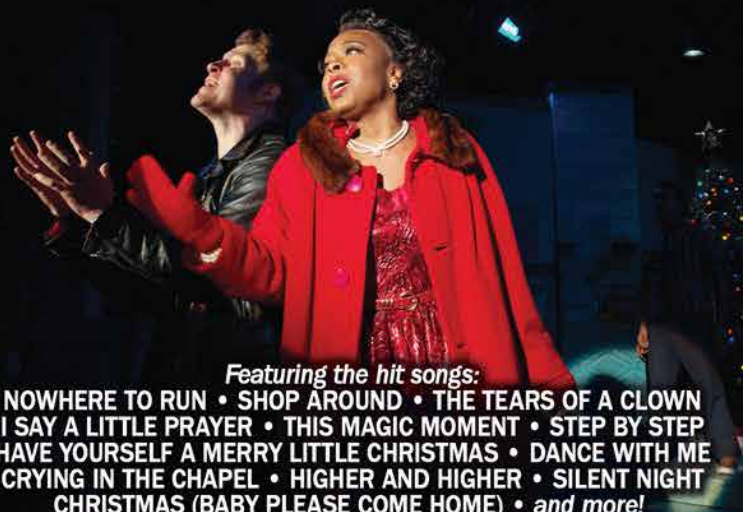
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## Moving On

*Theatres recently selected to represent their states/regions*

State winners moving on to their regional festival are shown below. Some states qualify to send two shows to their regional festival. Winners of the regional festivals will move on to the national festival in Des Moines, Iowa.

Productions advancing to the AACTFest national festival are in bold type. See all theatres representing states and regions in the AACTFest 2025 cycle at [aact.org/moving](https://aact.org/moving)

Region	Org Name	City	State	Play 25	Author 25	Winner 25
<b>1</b>	<b>Quannapowitt Players</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>MA</b>	<b>Time Stands Still</b>	<b>Donald Margulies</b>	<b>Region</b>
3	Little Theatre Off Broadway	Grove City	OH	<i>The Psychic</i>	Sam Bobrick	State
3	Three B Productions	Grand Rapids	OH	<i>Bright Star</i>	Steve Martin and Edie Brykell	State
4	Self Express Productions Inc	Winfield	AL	<i>The Real Inspector Hound</i>	Tom Stoppard	State
4	Spark Theater Company	Dothan	AL	<i>Radium Girls: Competition Version</i>	D W Gregory	State
7	Platte Valley Players	Brighton	CO	<i>The Tomato Plant Girl</i>	Wesley Middleton	State
7	Sopris Theatre Company	Glenwood Springs	CO	<i>Natural Shocks</i>	Lauren Gunderson	State

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actresses to shine!

*Celise Kalke - Synchronicity Theatre*



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# YouthFest 2025 Presents Exciting Theatre in Des Moines

AACT YouthFest 2025 is set for June 22-24, the days leading into AACTFest, and will be hosted by the Des Moines Playhouse, in Des Moines, Iowa.

Previously, YouthFest was hosted during AACTFest, the national theatre festival, resulting in an extremely limited schedule with only a handful of performance opportunities. The new time frame means YouthFest 2025 will have time for longer youth performances, room for additional youth performing companies, space for more youth-focused workshops, and even more YouthFest events and opportunities.

Thanks to the generous support of the Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation, seven youth theatre companies from across the U.S. and around the globe have been invited to perform at the festival. These productions will be adjudicated in an open forum that fosters a learning and educational experience for all. Read about the seven performing companies and their productions below. For more information and to register, visit [aact.org/youthfest](http://aact.org/youthfest).



**Landmark**  
COMMUNITY THEATRE

**Landmark Community Theatre**  
Thomaston, Connecticut  
(AACT Region 1)

Operating in the historic Thomaston Opera House in Thomaston, Connecticut, Landmark Community Theatre (LCT) seeks to offer opportunities where the community may produce, participate in, and enjoy the performing arts; educate all ages in theatre and music; and strive to preserve and protect the Opera House as a historic landmark and community space. LCT produces five mainstage productions, one teen production, and three youth education productions each season, as well as various one-day events.

*Disney's The Little Mermaid JR.*, music by Alan Menken; lyrics by Howard Ashman and Glenn Slater; book by Doug Wright.

In a magical kingdom under the sea, a beautiful young mermaid named Ariel longs to leave her ocean home to live in the world above. But first, she'll have to defy her father, the king of the sea, escape the clutches of an evil sea witch, and convince a prince that she's the girl with the perfect voice.



**Ebong TheatriX**  
Bethesda, Maryland  
(AACT Region 2)

Founded in 2014, Ebong TheatriX (ET), a South Asian-focused theatre group, has launched 21 plays and performed over 100 shows at festivals across the US and India. Over the years, ET has grown in creating and presenting plays that cover diverse topics and various forms of theatre. Productions range from ensemble comedies (*Bratya* and political satire *Kinoo Kaharer Theatre*) to social issues (*Bisbonno Barud*, *Looking Up*); from moral and relationship topics (*Five Grains of Rice*), to solo performances (*Bhalobasa Bhengechure*).

Additionally, ET embraced a third form of theatre in The Living Doll, maximizing physical and vocal acting to supplement props, lighting, and musical scores. ET strongly believes in nurturing the theatrical aspirations of younger generations. Its most recent production, *Five Grains of Rice*, was included in the Silver Springs One Act

Festival, the Maryland Community Theatre Festival, and the Eastern States Community Theatre Festival.

*Avinash*, by Arindam Ghosh

This one-act delves into the escalating hostility faced by the LGBTQ+ community and non-binary individuals, portraying those challenging scenarios within the contexts of both India and the United States. The play sheds light on how religion is sometimes weaponized to target marginalized groups, while in other instances, their vulnerable status as immigrants is exploited to intimidate them. Though the situations depicted are fictional, the inspiration behind the play stems from the recent tragic murder of a renowned Indian dancer and artist in the United States.

*continued on page 16* ▶



*A Pride and Prejudice prequel*

## Mr Bennet's Bride

by Emma Wood

[emmawoodplays.au/plays](http://emmawoodplays.au/plays)



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elegant...  
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Austentatious"  
*Atlanta Theatre Buzz*

"Sophisticated,  
stylish and clever."  
*Sydney Arts Guide*



**Central Park Players**  
Grand Haven, Michigan  
(AACT Region 3)

Central Park Players has been performing since 1959. It currently presents five regular season shows each year, one of which is a youth-family theatre production. The organization is run entirely by volunteers committed to creating a safe, inclusive community, and the company invites professionals and amateurs, inexperienced and experienced alike, to work together in continuing those traditions. The theatre's website proclaims that "Cultivating these relationships ensures we pass on our storytelling to new generations of patrons and

participants. We view theatre as a tool for creative expression, skill building and a method of raising cultural awareness."

*Runaway Princess*, by Kate Reinders and Paul Gordon

Princess (and yes, that's really her name) is about to marry her perfect prince, but when she discovers a dark secret on the eve of her wedding, she embarks on a quest to find the one person who can help her. In this brand-new musical, Princess falls down a rabbit hole of hijinks and fairy tale characters, uncovering the hidden truth about herself, and whether or not #PrincessMeansPerfect.



**Civic Theatre of Greater Lafayette**  
Lafayette, Indiana  
(AACT Region 3)

One of the oldest continuously active theatre organizations in Indiana, Civic Theatre of Greater Lafayette was founded in 1931 as the Lafayette Little Theatre (LLT), then reorganized and incorporated under its current name in 1966. An enormously successful Civic Youth Theatre was founded in 1985, and continues to educate and inspire hundreds of children every year. Civic Theatre of Greater Lafayette considers itself "a community theatre in the purest sense of the word—a theatre that entertains the community, serves the community,

reflects the community, involves the community, and strengthens our community."

*Mac Beth*, adapted by Erica Schmidt from *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

After school, seven teenage girls convene in an abandoned lot to perform a play. They drop their backpacks, transform their uniforms into costumes, and dive into a DIY retelling of *Macbeth*. As the girls conjure kings, warriors, and witches, Shakespeare's bloody tale seeps into their reality. *Mac Beth* recontextualizes a classic text to expose the ferocity of adolescence and the intoxicating power of collective fantasy.



**Northern Starz Center for the Performing Arts**  
Ramsey, Minnesota  
(AACT Region 5)

Northern Starz began as a nonprofit in 2012 and celebrated its 100th production last fall. As a center for the performing arts, it provides theatre, dance, and music opportunities for all ages and abilities. Its programming includes pre-K through 12th grade, adults, The Willow Tree Project (theatre for creative aging), an improv troupe, Starz and Stripes (theatre for veterans and their families), The Penguin

Project (individuals with special needs), and Camp Under the Starz (a sleep-away musical theatre camp for all abilities).

*Dark Road*, by Laura Lundgren Smith

When Greta, a young girl living in Nazi Germany, reads that the nearby women's concentration camp is hiring guards, she sees it as a chance to find her place in the world and provide for her sister, Lise. But soon she learns not only the reality of her duties, but how to justify her crimes, heading further and further down the dark road laid by the Third Reich. *Dark Road* is a powerful drama about the choices that allow evil to become ordinary.

continued on page 18 ▶

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### Clark Youth Theatre

Tulsa, Oklahoma  
(AACT Region 6)

Clark Youth Theatre, Tulsa's longest-running educational youth arts program, is now in its 46th year of providing high-quality youth community theatre. The theatre's award-winning programs teach more than performing art skills—children also learn respect for others, and gain self-confidence and self-discipline, reinforcing Clark's mission to cultivate future leaders through theatre. The youth arts program offers a full season of mainstage productions, as well as Penguin Project pro-



### Terrace Playhouse Youth Theatre Troupe

United States Army Garrison,  
Ansbach, Germany  
(AACT Region 10)

The Terrace Playhouse provides music and theatre activities that support the entire United States Army Garrison in Ansbach, Germany, performing productions by community members for other community members. The theatre's stated goals are: (1) to improve and enrich quality of life for all members of our military community through the



All YouthFest registrants will also receive a special discount on AACTFest registrations, allowing for up to seven days filled with performances, workshops, keynotes, mentoring/networking, and lifelong memories for all who attend.

### Festival Dates & Locations

- **YouthFest:** Sunday, June 22 - Tuesday, June 24 at Des Moines Playhouse, Des Moines, Iowa (more information: [aact.org/youthfest](https://aact.org/youthfest))
- **AACTFest:** Wednesday, June 25 - Saturday, June 28 at Hoyt Sherman Place (more information: [aact.org/25](https://aact.org/25))
- **Des Moines Marriott Downtown** is the official festival hotel for both YouthFest and AACTFest. (more information: [aact.org/go25](https://aact.org/go25))
- **Travel & Hotel Discounts** are available (more information: [aact.org/go25](https://aact.org/go25)). YouthFest shares the same hotel and travel discounts as AACTFest.

gramming, improvisational theatre, acting classes, and camps. Youth aged 8-18 can participate in programs and all skill levels are welcome.

### *Lost Girl*, by Kimberly Belflower

Long after returning from Neverland, Wendy decides that she must find Peter in order to reclaim her kiss, and move on with her life. Along the way, she meets other girls who went to Neverland, and learns she is not alone. A coming-of-age exploration of first love and lasting loss, *Lost Girl* continues the story of J.M. Barrie's beloved character—the girl who had to grow up.

production of well-rounded music and theatre activities; (2) to support military readiness by increasing morale, welfare and recreation; (3) to foster positive community relations, esprit de corps and civic responsibility through all aspects of the program; and (4) to encourage social awareness.

### *In the Tank*, by Rosemary Frisino Toohey

Two lobsters in a seafood restaurant ponder their existence and the meaning of life on a "Seafood Friday Night."



### EARLY BIRD REGISTRATION

Available September 1, 2024 - March 1, 2025

\$ 250

- Includes YouthFest T-Shirt
- Includes access to Youth Shows, Workshops, and Special Events
- Chaperone Rate (Ages 18+): \$225
- AACTFest Add-On: \$100

### ADVANCE REGISTRATION

Available March 2 - May 31, 2025

\$ 350

- Includes YouthFest T-Shirt
- Includes access to Youth Shows, Workshops, and Special Events
- Chaperone Rate (Ages 18+): \$325
- AACTFest Add-On: \$100

### ON-SITE REGISTRATION

Begins June 1, 2025

\$ 425

- Includes YouthFest T-Shirt
- Includes access to Youth Shows, Workshops, and Special Events
- Chaperone Rate (Ages 18+): \$400
- AACTFest Add-On: \$100

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# Community Theatre Management Conference 2025

Registration for AACT's annual Community Theatre Management Conference (CTMC) is now open. The 2025 conference will take place June 22-24 at the Des Moines Marriott Downtown, just days before AACTFest 2025, allowing attendees to maximize hotel and travel savings.

This dynamic conference is open to administrators at all levels—full-time professional managers, part-time office administrators, board members, or the dedicated volunteers who do it all. Regardless of position or organization size, you'll gain valuable insight, best practices, and new perspectives, through a customized series of intensive, topic-specific, large and small group discussions that speak directly to your unique challenges and experiences.

Topics typically include sales and marketing, fundraising and development, season selection, volunteer recruitment and retention, how to deal with burnout, and box office operations, among other things.

*"I was totally amazed by [how well the conference was planned], and the wonderful offerings of the other members present. This was my first time, and I have to say it was a totally rewarding experience, and I took copious notes. Wow! Kudos to all who organized this! You had it all covered! Thank you!"*

*- Richard Grieger, The Summer Place,  
Naperville, Illinois*



Chad-Alan Carr returns to facilitate the 2025 conference. He is the Founding Executive/Artistic Director of Gettysburg Community Theatre in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. He also serves on the AACT Board of Directors and was YouthFest Chair in 2017, 2019, and 2023. His accomplishments include directing the Eastern States Regional Premiere of The Penguin Project (theatre for youth with special needs) and serving as a board member for the Pennsylvania Association of Community Theatres and

the Eastern States Theatre Association. A frequent presenter at AACTFests and participant in AACT Roundtables, Chad-Alan brings to CTMC a wealth of experience and an ability to create dynamic group interactions.

*"I especially appreciate the openness and honesty the group was able to achieve, without judgment or disparagement. That was what made this conference so helpful. As Chad-Alan reminded us, we are not alone, and knowing that others in the theatre community share our devotion and love for the arts, as well as our worries and challenges, was very reassuring and inspiring."*

*- Dianne Beaulieu-Arms, Poison Apple Productions,  
Pittsburg, California*

## Registration\*

	Before June 1	After June 1
AACT Member	\$295	\$325
Non-Member	\$370	\$400

\*AACTFest attendees receive an additional \$15 discount.

Registration closes Friday, June 20, 2025. Register at [aact.org/ctmc](https://aact.org/ctmc).

## BIPOC Scholarship

AACT is providing two BIPOC scholarships for this year's Community Theatre Management Conference to support and mentor theatre-makers of color. Travel, lodging, and registration for AACTFest are the responsibility of the recipient. Deadline to apply is March 1, 2025. Apply at [aact.org/scholarship](https://aact.org/scholarship).

## Hotel/Travel

As CTMC is held just prior to AACTFest 2025, conference attendees will receive the same special hotel and airline rates. Consider spending the entire week at AACTFest to continue networking, attend workshops, and enjoy fine theatre!

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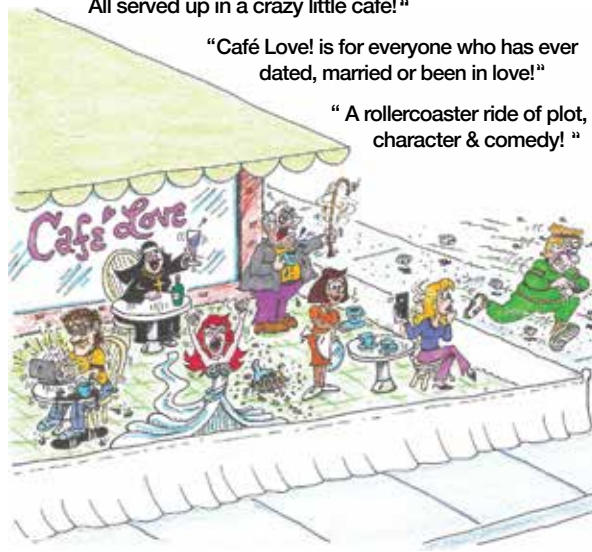
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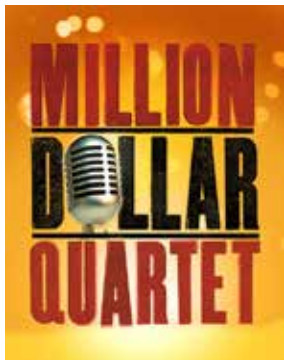
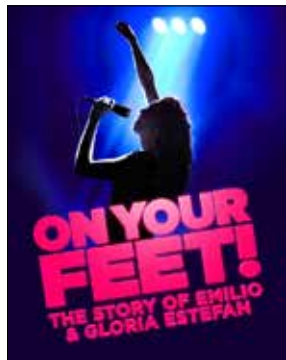
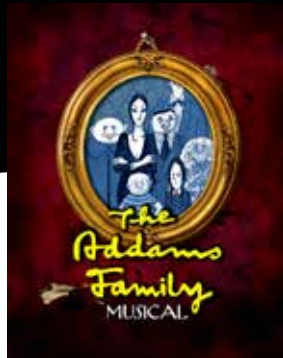
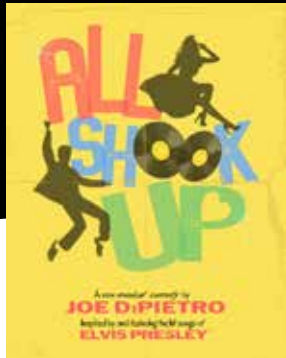
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# Broadway Bound: AACT's New York Theatre Adventure

Ready for a weekend full of Broadway magic, fun times, and unforgettable memories? This February, AACT is taking you on a theatre lover's dream trip to New York City!

From February 20-22, 2025, we're offering an incredible three-night stay at the Hyatt Centric Times Square. Not only will you be surrounded by the energy of the city, but you'll be steps away from the best Broadway has to offer. Whether you've been to NYC a dozen times or this is your first visit, there's something so special about experiencing the city with fellow theatre enthusiasts.

Now, let's talk shows! You'll start off with the must-see Audra McDonald in *Gypsy*. Audra is a Broadway icon, and seeing her live in this production is an absolute treat. But we didn't stop there—you also get to choose a second show from an incredible lineup, including *Death Becomes Her*, *Six*, *Hell's Kitchen*, *Swept Away*, or

*The Outsiders*. No matter what you pick, you're in for a world-class Broadway experience.

Of course, it's not just about the shows. You'll also have plenty of free time to explore New York your way. Want to check out the latest exhibit at MoMA? Wander around Central Park? Or maybe you just want to grab a coffee and people-watch—this trip gives you the chance to see NYC your way.

One of the best parts of this trip is the people. You'll be hanging out with fellow AACT members and theatre-lovers who get just as excited about Broadway as you do. You'll bond over amazing performances, enjoy meals together, and make some new friends along the way. It's like a mini-theatre family vacation.

If this sounds like your kind of getaway, here's how to lock in your spot. We're taking reservations on a first-come, first-served basis, and a \$400 deposit will secure your place. The cost is \$815 per person for double occupancy or \$1,015 for a single room. Previous AACT trips have sold out quickly, so don't wait too long to sign up!

While we've got the hotel and shows covered, travel to and from NYC is totally up to you. That way, you can pick whatever transportation option works best, whether you're flying, driving, or taking a train.

This trip is the perfect way to dive into Broadway, soak up the NYC vibe, and make lasting memories with fellow theatre-lovers. Whether you're new to the city or can't wait to return, it's going to be an unforgettable experience. So, what are you waiting for? Let's go to Broadway!

For more info and to register, visit [aact.org/nyc](https://aact.org/nyc). Limited capacity. Subject to availability.





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# From Page to Stage: AACT NewPlayFest

David A. VanCleave, AACT Education Director and NewPlayFest Dramaturg

A recently divorced mother and Mother Nature rage and rebuild after being ripped apart and realigned.

A “come-to-Jesus” barbecue recipe helps bridge the divide in humanity during the Jim Crow era.

A semi-famous recluse poet and the copywriter next door challenge and inspire each other, discovering the power of true communication.

These three world premieres wrap up AACT NewPlayFest 2024, the sixth cycle of an exciting two-year collaboration between playwrights and community theatres, resulting in publication and licensing by Dramatic Publishing Company.

The first three winning plays were featured in the Fall issue of *Spotlight*. Here is a look at the final three:

## ***Eating Blackberries*, by Pam Harbaugh**

A raging Mother Nature serves as a backdrop to the shifting landscapes of human relationships in Pam Harbaugh's *Eating Blackberries*, which premiered at Hickory Community Theatre (HCT) in Hickory, North Carolina, this April.

Set in a family home filled with moving boxes in Northern California, where wildfires and wildlife threaten, the story follows recently divorced Elizabeth and her teenage son, Jackson. When Elizabeth's ex-husband, Paul, and his new, young, pregnant wife, Sofia, pay a surprise visit, civil discourse quickly turns into a gritty and explosive fight.

Four months later, as earthquakes threaten the community, relationships heave, break, and realign in surprising ways, giving Elizabeth the strength to move on, and audiences the hope of humanity's ability to evolve.

Playwright Pam Harbaugh started writing *Blackberries* after a friend's difficult divorce. “I was struck by how men can go and start second families, but women can't, or don't,” she said. At the same time, her husband was battling pancreatic cancer. “After he died, I was really angry, you know? And so, unfortunately, the characters became really angry. They were not people audiences want to spend time with, so I knew I needed to keep writing.”

As she continued to rewrite from her home in Florida, she watched in distress as wildfires devastated Northern California. “But then, you know, we were hearing about how, because of the pandemic, there were fish in the Venice canals and people in India seeing the Himalayas for the first time, because the smog finally lifted.”

Harbaugh couldn't ignore the parallels between the seismic changes happening in nature and in families. “It felt organic, this idea that, of



Ken Burns

*Tension rises between Elizabeth (Holley Dagenhardt, left), Paul (Paul Sapp, center), and their son, Jackson (Hudson Ackerman) in the world premiere of Pam Harbaugh's Eating Blackberries at Hickory Community Theatre*

course, the change in nature is going to happen with us, too. Because we are a part of nature.”

Eric Seale, Hickory Community Theatre's Artistic Director, said, “Being able to sit in the same room and experience these types of relationships and journeys is unlike any other experience.” His immediate connection to the characters and their relationships was a large reason why he selected the script for HCT.

## ***Harris Cashes Out!***

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Another contributor? The daunting sound design. “Due to the significant role Mother Nature plays, sound design essentially becomes a fifth character,” Seale said. “I found that challenge to be really exciting.” Between weather, wildlife, and power outage alerts pinging the characters’ phones, there are over 150 scripted sound cues.

The challenge was worth it. Hickory Community Theatre audiences raved about the entire production, particularly how they empathized with the characters and the hopeful reminder of our human ability to overcome.

### ***Tennessee Wet Rub*, by Kim E. Ruyle**

On January 31, 1951, the costliest ice storm in history devastated a 100-mile area of Tennessee and West Virginia. Cities were covered in 8-16 inches of ice and snow, resulting in over 25 deaths, and an estimated \$100 million in damages (approximately \$1.2 billion today).

When playwright Kim E. Ruyle read about the storm, he immediately realized it’d make a great setting for a play. “I’m thinking ‘Okay,

what was going on in Tennessee in 1951?’” Ruyle said. “I just had this idea of an older white couple, hunkered down, when an eloping interracial couple seek shelter after their car goes into a ditch.”

Around the same time, Ruyle came across Maya Angelou’s famous poem, “The Human Family,” which ends with the refrain “We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.” The quote stuck with Ruyle, guiding his writing process and becoming the play’s central theme.

*Tennessee Wet Rub* tells the story of Hank and Bertha, owners of Bertha’s BBQ, as they wait out the 1951 blizzard. With no customers or electricity, Hank decides to finally experiment with a new wet rub barbecue recipe. A startling knock at the door reveals Arleta, a shivering white teenager, and Dunk, her 20-year-old black fiancé, seeking shelter.

The play received its world premiere at Cottage Theatre in Cottage Grove, Oregon, on August 9, 2024. The production was directed by celebrated actor and writer Stanley Coleman. “In 1951, I was a one-year-old Black boy growing up in the racially fraught landscape of Louisiana,” he wrote in the program’s Director’s Note. “The South was firmly entrenched in the Jim Crow era, a time marked by rigid segregation, including the prohibition of interracial marriage. Such unions were not merely illegal; they were perilous.”

“*Wet Rub* goes beyond such legal complexities of interracial relationships,” Coleman continues. “It explores the profound complexities of human difference and our capacity to bridge divides. It is both heart-warming and thought-provoking, a testament to Kim’s masterful storytelling.”

Cottage Theatre’s Executive Director, Susan Goes, and audiences agreed. “When we first read Kim’s script, we were convinced our audiences would love the play, and they certainly did!” Goes said. “To quote one of the many positive emails from our patrons: ‘Wow! We loved everything about this production. The story was so rich with the humanity we strive for — especially in today’s world.’”

Ruyle was overjoyed by the reactions. “Having an interracial family and familiarity with Appalachia, this story was always very special to me,” he said. “But there’s nothing more rewarding than the laughter, tears, and post-show conversation that came from Cottage Theatre’s production.”

### ***The China Shop*, by Richard Manley**

Richard Manley often writes about lonely people struggling to feel relevant and the joy they discover from, as Virginia Woolf put it, “little daily miracles; matches struck unexpectedly in the dark.” In *The China Shop*, that would be the once sort-of famous poet, Derby Walters, and Mary Scunzio, the award-winning copywriter next door.

*continued on page 26* ▶



Matt Emrich

Dunk (Clarence Miller, left) and Hank (Mark Allen, right) discover commonalities in Cottage Theatre’s world premiere of *Tennessee Wet Rub* by Kim E. Ruyle

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The play, which received its world premiere at Lincoln Community Playhouse in November, begins after Derby accepts a friend's house-sitting invitation at a Manhattan co-op, thus quietly ending his years of self-exile in France, following his wife's unexpected and horrific death. His hopes to inconspicuously slip back into society at his own pace are repeatedly (and hilariously) thwarted by Mary, the aggressively pushy editor of a literary magazine, snobby members of the co-op board, and a wealthy lawyer determined to uncover Derby's suspected murky past.

Manley calls it a "literate comedy," in reference to the characters' writing careers and the style of comedy he strives for. "Contemporary theatre's humor so often relies on slapstick or farce, but I much prefer the subtle wit, or humor where there's some thought involved for the audience," he told Nebraska Public Media. "I started by creating a story about my life, but I didn't want it to be heavy or about how profound I was. I wanted humor, wit, and sarcasm."

Derby and Mary represent various parts of Manley. He fell in love with playwriting in college, but his family insisted he find a back-up plan. "I was young and stupid, so I believed them," he admits. "And so I got into copywriting, which I thought was writing, but wasn't *really* writing."

After years of running his own ad agency and design company, but struggling to truly enjoy life, Manley and his wife sold everything they owned and embarked on an international sabbatical without any reservations or deadlines. The experience ultimately gave him the courage to finally start the playwriting career he always wanted. Since then, his



Barbara Armistead

The *China Shop* by Richard Manley premiered at Lincoln Community Playhouse starring Victoria Lininger (left) as Mary Scunzio and Chris Berger (right) as Walter Derby

plays have been produced Off-Broadway and across the country, and have won or been a finalist in dozens of national and international competitions, including AACT NewPlayFest.

Morrie Enders, Executive Director at Lincoln Community Playhouse, reflected on reading the script for the first time: "It's funny and witty and very well written. The characters are real; the arc is strong. I kept finding myself muttering 'Oh, that line lands. Oh, that's clever.' We immediately knew people were really going to love it."

Enders and the LCP team were right. Audiences embraced the world premiere production, erupting in laughter one moment and quietly reflecting on "matches, struck unexpectedly in the dark" the next.

#### What's Next

The Fall issue of *Spotlight* featured the first three winning plays: *Criminal Mischief* by William Cameron, *The Red Flags* by Catherine Castellani, and *I Thought I Knew You* by Philip J. Kaplan. Be sure to read the Summer 2025 issue of *Spotlight* for the announcement of the 2026 winners. AACT NewPlayFest is sponsored in part by the Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation.



## Make a Legacy Gift

Please consider including the American Association of Community Theatre in your legacy plans through a will, trust, life insurance gift, or other legacy gift. Through these special gifts, friends like you are able to sustain AACT's mission and provide learning experiences for AACT-member companies participating in AACTFest national festivals

To learn more about AACT's Legacy Society, visit [aact.org/legacy](https://aact.org/legacy) or contact the AACT office at [info@aact.org](mailto:info@aact.org)



# Winter Webinars Engage Creativity

AACT continues to offer engaging educational opportunities, even throughout this crazy time of year of holidays and end-of-year giving campaigns. Read about the winter virtual masterclasses and member-only roundtables below, and visit [aact.org/webinars](https://aact.org/webinars) to register or learn more about all webinars.

All events begin at 2:00 pm Eastern, 1:00 pm Central, 12:00 pm Mountain, and 11:00 am Pacific.

## Virtual Masterclass

AACT Virtual Masterclasses are 75 to 90-minute, in-depth explorations of specific skills or topics. These online presentations are designed to provide new perspectives, powerful strategies, and ways to unleash your creativity.

Registration is \$15 for members and \$25 for non-members. Each registration includes access to our Weekend Replay, allowing you to watch the recording at a time that better suits your schedule.

**Thursday, February 6**

### **Pissing People Off! (For Fun and Profit)**

presented by Eric Seale,  
Artistic Director, Hickory Community Theatre

Sometimes, expanding your artistic scope and connecting with new patrons means making enemies or courting backlash. What about your sponsors? What will the community think? Overcome fear and uncertainty and learn to embrace potential risks in search of artistic rewards! In this session, Eric Seale will lead you through a discussion on risky programming, as well as how to normalize change as you seek new audiences, while developing the ones you already have.



*Eric Seale originally hails from the Bluegrass of Lexington, Kentucky. His career has had a focus on directing and administration, but also includes extensive work as a performer, designer, and producer. He is currently in his fourth season as artistic director for Hickory Community Theatre in Hickory, North Carolina, but previously served as the artistic managing director of Central Kentucky Theatre and as artistic director of Actors Guild of Lexington. Eric has also worked as a designer in multiple theatrical disciplines as well as working as a professional graphic designer.*

## Member-Only Roundtables

AACT Roundtables, available for AACT members only, provide a free and convenient forum to share experiences, ideas, concerns, and solutions. Each Roundtable features a group of panelists, which means a diverse range of experiences will be shared. Conversations are driven by audience questions through a pre-session questionnaire and live Q&A.

Interested in serving on an upcoming roundtable? Submit an application at [aact.org/panelist](https://aact.org/panelist)

**Tuesday, January 21**

### **Open Topic (Theatres With Paid Staff)**

Connect with other theatres to discuss challenges, strategies, and recent successes specific to organizations with paid staff.

**Tuesday, February 18**

### **Open Topic (All-Volunteer Organizations)**

Connect with other all-volunteer theatres to discuss challenges, strategies, and recent successes specific to organizations without any paid staff.

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# Adjudication Seminar 2025

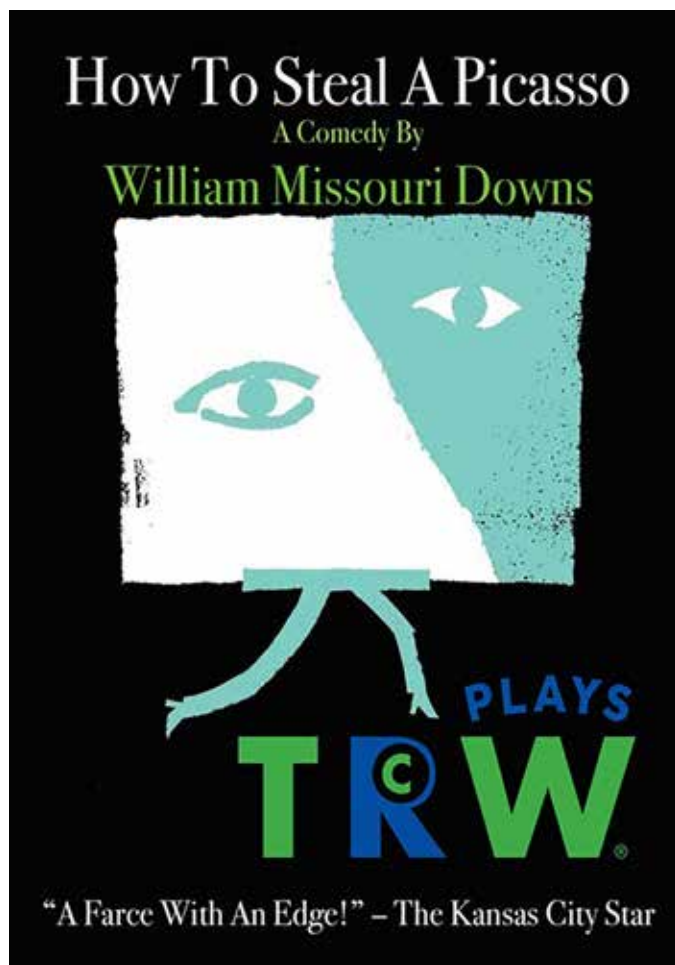
Adjudicators are key to the success of AACTFest—at the state, regional, and national level. Their role is not only to highlight outstanding productions, but to create a learning experience for the participating companies and audience members, as well.

With so many festivals across the country, demand is high for trained adjudicators, which is why AACT offers its Adjudication Seminar every two years, as part of the national festival week.

With the week's 12 performances and adjudications, workshops, and other activities, it might seem impossible to experience it all, and attend the seminar as well. Thankfully, the Adjudication Seminar uses a virtual/in-person hybrid model that does provide time for other AACTFest events. The hybrid model also enhances the seminar with more in-depth discussions and guest speakers—and maximizes the overall festival experience for participants.

The AACT 2025 Adjudication Seminar, facilitated by Kristi Quinn and Dennis Yslas, begins with six virtual sessions, two hours each, scheduled for April-June. After completing the training, participants view the performances at the National Festival in Des Moines, then respond to them with techniques learned in training, receiving feedback designed to polish both their message and delivery. In-person sessions during the festival will also include how to negotiate with fellow adjudicators to determine award outcomes, and how to prepare for a work as an adjudicator.

The combination of the seminar and the festival experience is truly transformational.



## About AACT Adjudication

The purpose of AACT adjudication is threefold:

- to accurately reflect to the performing company what has been successfully achieved;
- to outline reasonable steps that might be taken to enhance interpretation of the story;
- and, finally, to select which of the companies will receive awards. At its best, adjudication both educates and illuminates."

## Virtual Session Schedule

Saturdays from 12:00-2:00 Eastern, 11:00-1:00 Central, 10:00-12:00 Mountain, and 9:00-11:00 Pacific.

- April 26
- May 3, 10, 24, 31
- June 7

## In-Person Session Schedule

June 25-28 at AACTFest 2025 in Des Moines, Iowa

Exact meeting times TBD

## Registration Information

\$175; limited to 15 people. AACTFest 2025 registration is also required.

## BIPOC Scholarship

AACT is providing two BIPOC scholarships for the 2025 Adjudication Seminar to support and mentor theatre-makers of color. Travel, lodging, and registration for AACTFest is the responsibility of the recipient. Deadline to apply is March 1, 2025. More details at [aact.org/seminar](https://aact.org/seminar).

## About Our Facilitators



**Kristi Quinn** has been active in community theatre for over 25 years. Her theatre experience includes acting, directing, set decoration, and costume design, as well as public relations, grant writing, and development. She has adjudicated festivals at all levels, and has participated as a core committee member and chair of several state and regional festivals. She has served as Executive Director of the Sioux City Community Theatre,

Development Director of the Sioux City Art Center and Artistic Director for the Pioneer Valley Players in Sergeant Bluff, Iowa. She leads the theatre and speech programs at the Sergeant Bluff-Luton Community Schools in Sergeant Bluff, Iowa. She was a board member of the Nebraska Association of Community Theatre. She served as AACT's President in 2022-2023, and previously as Vice President for Festivals, and as the Region V Representative on the AACT Board of Directors.



**Dennis Yslas** has adjudicated for AACT at the state, regional and national levels, including Virtual AACTFest 2021 and YouthFest 2019 in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, as well as alternate adjudicator for AACTFest 2017 in Rochester, Minnesota. He completed the AACT Adjudication curriculum in 2001 in Memphis, Tennessee. Yslas is the Executive Director of Theatre Network of Texas, Inc. He is a member

of Actors' Equity Association, having started his acting career on the Bozo the Clown show over 40 years ago. He is an award-winning actor and director in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas area.



# Regionally Speaking

*AACT's membership consists of organizations and individuals from 11 Regions. Each Region has a Regional Representative who serves on the AACT Board of Directors. (For more on AACT Regions, including a map, visit [aact.org/regions](http://aact.org/regions).)*

*The Representative's role is an important one. It includes bringing regional concerns and achievements to the Board's attention, providing information about AACT programs and services to members in the Region, and furthering communication and networking among those members.*



**John Lyttle** is AACT's new Region 7 Representative, serving the states of Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming. A retired Superintendent of Schools in Cheyenne, Wyoming, John is not only a dedicated educator but also a passionate visual artist and a committed volunteer in the theatre community. With experience as a board member and active participant in the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players—now celebrating its 95th season—John embodies the spirit of collaboration and creativity that defines community theatre.

Having attended several AACT Festivals, he found himself inspired by the incredible talent and creativity showcased across the country.

"It was fantastic to see what others are doing and to connect with fellow theatre enthusiasts," he said. The experience of festival adjudications was particularly enlightening, fueling his passion for community theatre even further. When Donna Fisher, the previous Region Representative, invited him to step into this role, John said he felt honored. He holds Donna in high regard for her unwavering dedication to nurturing the arts.

Region 7 may be geographically vast, but its community theatres share a unique bond. Many of them operate in rural settings, where local support is not just important, but vital. John believes that by expanding the theatre network within the region, "We can unlock tremendous opportunities to learn from one another and grow together."

Wyoming is making strides with its newly formed statewide organization, which is gearing up for its second conference. Colorado successfully hosted its community theatre festival in August. John envisions a similar collaborative spirit spreading throughout Region 7.

AGENT, GARY DASILVA

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- The Minneapolis Star-Tribune

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- The Associated Press

A colorful illustration of four people in a circle. A woman in a pink dress sits on the left. A man in a green jacket and blue pants stands in the center, holding a red and green striped umbrella. A woman in a green shirt and red pants stands to his right. A woman in a pink shirt and blue shorts sits on the right. They are all smiling and appear to be part of a performance. The word "BINGO" is written in large, stylized letters across the bottom of the circle.

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A cluster of five bingo balls. The numbers visible are 19, 15, 31, 69, and 3. The balls are white with red and blue borders.

# The AACT Advantage

*Lou Ursone, Executive Director of Curtain Call, Inc. (Stamford, Connecticut), AACT Board of Directors, and Spotlight Editorial Team asks theatre makers why they are part of AACT.*



**Lynn Harper Nelson**  
Tupelo Community Theatre  
Tupelo, Mississippi  
AACT Region 4A Representative

Working for peanuts is an old adage referring to not making very much money on a job. But for this long-time community theatre activist who has spent a career as an HR specialist, her most recent stage appearance was actually working with Peanuts: Lynn Harper Nelson appeared as Peppermint Patty in the Tupelo Community Theatre's production of *You're a Good Man Charlie Brown* this past fall.

"Tupelo Community Theatre had been a member of AACT for many, many years," Nelson said, "but once I learned more about the organization, I became an individual member, too." What really sealed the deal for her dedication to AACT was her first experience at AACTFest in Tacoma, Washington, in 2009.

"I've always loved going to festivals—especially when I don't have a dog in the hunt," Nelson said. "Watching the productions and hearing the adjudications is like a graduate-level course in stagecraft," she added,

noting that she is a better actor, better director, and better audience member from what she has learned at AACTFest and other similar state and regional festivals. (Her note: get involved in the festival process!)

"The friends and colleagues you make become incredible support systems. People with similar work/theatre experiences who you can reach out to for advice or suggestions are a phone call or email away," she noted. And "they become friends who get your jokes," she added.

Nelson became more involved with AACT because she just "fell in love" with the people she met at AACTFest 2009. "And when you get involved nationally, you realize that if you're ever stranded in any airport in the country, you have a theatre friend to call for help," she joked.

In a true sense of being in the right place at the right time, the Region 4A representative was stepping down and looking for a successor. Nelson inquired about the duties in hopes of helping find a successor, and instead wound up filling the position, which she has done now for many years. "That all happened because I was at AACTFest," she said.

One favorite AACTfest memory came during the festival in Rochester, New York. In the lobby of the hotel, she met a couple who were thinking of going to Niagara Falls. She didn't know them, "but they were theatre people, so I went along. After a great day trip, their young son—who they said 'doesn't take to strangers'—leaned in and fell asleep in my lap. That's what I mean by saying AACT brings people together."

Nelson has found WorldFest to be "an incredible experience. I went to my first one, not expecting much due to language barriers, but I was blown away by the performances that I saw—and was able to understand everything," she said. "I can't wait for the next one."

"I believe in giving back, and what AACT has done for me and others needs to be supported," Nelson said. That's why she is a member of the AACT Legacy Society—pledging to support the organization with a gift to the AACT Endowment.

"The organization and what it represents feeds my emotional, creative and social well-being," she said. "It can do the same for you," she added.



**Seth Sponhouse**  
Executive Artistic Director  
Community Theatre League  
Williamsport, Pennsylvania

"Madison saved my life!"

For you presidential scholars, we're not talking about our fourth president, but rather AACT's biennial National Directors Conference, which, for many years, was held in Madison, Wisconsin, and was simply known to many as the "Madison Conference."

And whose life was saved? Native Pennsylvanian and Executive Director of Community Theatre League, (CTL) Seth Sponhouse. He's in his sixth season as Executive Artistic Director, and his ninth overall with the organization, having started there in the education program. He and his theatre have been members of AACT for many years, as well.

Unlike many theatre leaders, Sponhouse's prior community theatre experience was limited to ensemble work in just two productions: *Cinderella* and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. With an undergraduate minor degree in theatre, his first job out of college was in the box office of a presenting house in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, but that didn't exactly prepare him for the leadership role he now holds. When his wife, Marissa, took a teaching job in Williamsport, he returned to his hometown and began his career at CTL.



"I couldn't believe they (CTL) were trusting this 27-year-old guy with their almost 50-year-old organization," he said, but feels that meeting like-minded and generous colleagues at his first "Madison" conference has made his success possible.

"For me, as an individual, the friendships and connections made through AACT and its conferences have been invaluable," Sponhouse said. "Our roles as leaders can sometimes make us feel isolated, but with the infinite resources available through AACT, we can be better equipped for success. There are multiple people I connect with daily from other parts of the country to ask for, or share, advice."

At his first AACT National Directors Conference, "I met a room full of generous people who are always welcoming and reliable—especially

meaningful to me as one of the younger guys in the room," he said, adding that conversations revolving around policies and fundraising have been key to his day-to-day operations.

"Learning how others handle participant safety was especially helpful. What I realized—and continue to tell people—is that while we were never *not* safe, we could always be safer," Sponhouse said. Like many AACT member theatres, CTL does background checks on everyone involved there.

"As an organization and as an individual, AACT allows us to be a part of something bigger," Sponhouse noted. "We're in an industry that is always trying to be bigger and better. AACT lets you know that you're not alone, and lifts you up," he added.



## Support AACT!

As theatre professionals and practitioners, you know the power of community theatre. It's where creativity blossoms, diverse stories come to life, and audiences connect through shared experiences. But today, our theatres face mounting challenges—financial pressures, operational hurdles, and the need for a unified voice to advocate for their future.

That's why we're asking for your support of the **American Association of Community Theatre (AACT)**, the backbone of community theatre advocacy and collaboration. By donating, you're not just contributing to an organization—you're empowering a movement that strengthens and sustains theatres like yours across the country.

Your contribution will:

- **Amplify advocacy efforts** to secure funding and resources for community theatres.
- **Provide essential resources** to navigate legal, financial, and operational challenges.
- **Foster professional development** to grow and innovate within our field.

- **Encourage collaboration** among theatres to share best practices and solutions.
- **Develop programs** to nurture the next generation of theatre practitioners.

Together, we can ensure theatres remain accessible, creative, and resilient, offering opportunities for artists, professionals, and audiences alike. Every donation helps build a stronger, more connected community of theatres, working toward a shared vision. Will you join us in championing the future of community theatre?

Thank you for your commitment to the arts and for helping us keep community theatre thriving.

Quiana Clark-Roland  
AACT Executive Director



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# Navigating the “Glass Cliff” in Theatre Leadership

Kelli McCloud-Schingen, AACT Board of Directors

In 2020 there was a global awakening to the racial injustices enacted upon communities of color worldwide. Inspired to action by mass protests, leaders in organizations and institutions began to ask themselves the question, “What can we do?” Many organizations began to realize the importance of representation, and scurried to hire more people of color.

Mainstream theatres swiftly responded to the call from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) artists in “We See You White American Theatres” [[weseeyouwat.com](http://weseeyouwat.com)] to do better, and in the spirit of good intentions, professional and community theatres set out to do just that—do better, be better. They realized the importance of paying attention, instead of ignoring race and racism, and explored the ways that unintended racism showed up in their organization.

However, intent does not equal impact. Without guidance and skilled professionals to help support or drive these efforts, the result is a Band-Aid, at best—and the “Glass Cliff” for those very artists of color, at worst.

The Glass Cliff is a concept introduced by researchers Anne-Marie Slaughter and Heather Williams, describing the phenomenon where women or people of color are often appointed to leadership positions in organizations that are facing significant challenges or crises. While these appointments may seem like an opportunity for advancement, they often come with increased scrutiny, higher expectations, and a greater likelihood of failure.

In theatre, this manifests itself in various forms, from hiring inexperienced DEI directors without a budget and team, producing shows with large multi-racial casts without a community that will support it, or without production teams that understand cultural differences in communication, hierarchy, or time, that may come with different racial and ethnic communities.

Researchers have found that when organizations take any of the above approaches, they inadvertently set up for failure the organization, their new DEI efforts, and artists of color. This makes it easy to give up on inclusion initiatives. However, if we understand the Glass Cliff and its potential pitfalls, we can focus on the promise of inclusion instead.

## Understanding the Glass Cliff in Theatre

The Glass Cliff in theatre can be attributed to several factors:

- **Stereotypes:** Preconceived notions about people of color in leadership roles can lead to them being viewed as more risky or less qualified for senior positions.
- **Tokenism:** Organizations may appoint people of color to leadership positions, or produce shows with large casts of color, to appear inclusive without truly seeing them, empowering them, or providing adequate people or financial support.
- **Like-Me Bias:** Without realizing it, individuals and organizations may expect that only people who remind them of themselves will achieve success, if people behave in ways that are not mainstream, they are less successful.
- **Lack of Mentorship:** Artists of color may have fewer opportunities for mentorship and sponsorship on stage and backstage, making it difficult to navigate the existing culture and challenges of leadership.
- **Increased Scrutiny:** Leaders from marginalized groups often face heightened scrutiny and criticism, making it harder to succeed.

## Strategies for Avoiding the Glass Cliff

1. **Build a Strong Network:** Cultivate relationships with artists and technicians of color in the theatre industry. A strong network will provide support, mentorship, and opportunities for collaboration.
2. **Create Mentoring Opportunities:** Find mentors who have successfully overcome challenges and achieved leadership positions. Invite them to work with new/young artists and technicians of color, and help them learn to navigate the industry without losing themselves or their culture in the process.
3. **Be Prepared for Challenges:** Anticipate that change brings challenges. There will be board members, funders, other artists and technicians who feel that they are being replaced and begin to push-back on your efforts. To mitigate this, carefully craft a statement and vision for the organization that creates a space for all.
4. **Advocate for Diversity and Inclusion:** Articulate the benefits of being an inclusive company, and advocate for greater diversity and inclusion in the theatre industry—





publicly and often. Support initiatives that promote equity and opportunity for all.

5. **Practice Cultural Humility:** Cultural humility is active engagement in an ongoing process of self-reflection that informs deeper understanding and respect of cultural differences. Be mindful that your way is not the only way. Create space for contributions of others that are culturally informed.

By understanding the Glass Cliff and implementing these strategies, artists and technicians of color in theatre can increase their chances of success, and your theatre can thrive as a more equitable and inclusive culture.



**Kelli McLoud-Schingen** is Artistic Director of World Stage Theatre Company in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and President of KMS Intercultural Consulting. She is a global diversity and inclusion specialist as well as a theatrical actor and director. She specializes in storytelling, cultural competence, and healing racism. A certified professional mediator, she holds a B.A. in Communication from Aurora University, and an M.A. in Cross-Cultural Studies from the University of Houston-Clear Lake.

She is co-author of *Cultural Detective: African American*, and has extensive training and leadership experience in the intercultural and diversity fields.

# Nominations Open for AACT National Awards

## Honoring Excellence in Community Theatre



You're invited to submit nominations for the 2025 AACT National Awards, celebrating exceptional contributions to the world of community theatre. Nominations will remain open through January 20, 2025, at [aact.org/national](http://aact.org/national).

Awards recognize those who have made an indelible mark on community theatre across the nation, and will be presented at AACTFest 2025 in Des Moines, Iowa, on June 27.

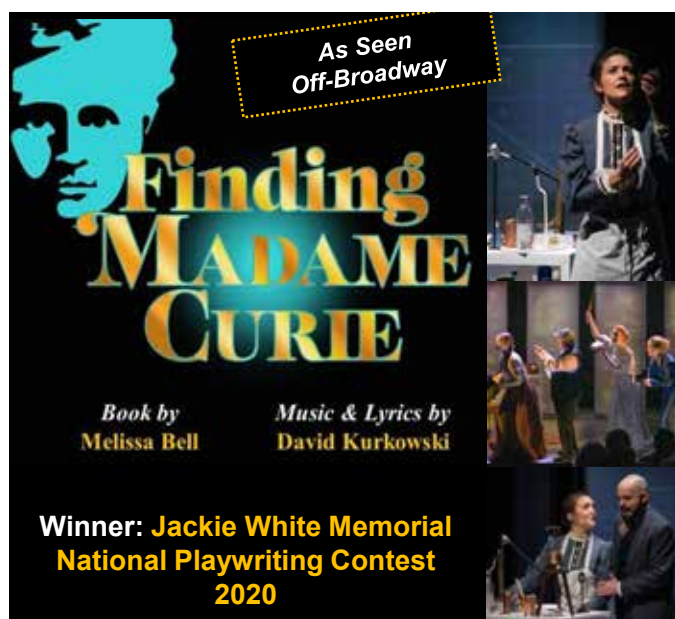
AACT bestows 10 prestigious awards, each recognizing distinct areas of service and leadership. These accolades honor those who have significantly advanced the cause of community theatre nationwide:

- Art Cole Lifetime of Leadership Award
- David C. Bryant Outstanding Service Award
- Diamond Crown Organization Award

- Distinguished Merit Award
- Mort Clark International Achievement Award
- Robert E. Gard Superior Volunteer Award
- Shining Star Award
- Special Recognition Award
- Twink Lynch Organizational Achievement Award
- Corporate Award

The nomination process is open to all. Whether it's to honor a colleague, mentor, or local theatre hero who has demonstrated extraordinary commitment to the arts, you can shine a spotlight on their contributions. In particular, the AACT Awards Committee encourages community theatres to consider candidates of all ages for those awards whose criteria are based on merit, rather than age or length of service.

For more information on award criteria, previous honorees, and the nomination form, visit [aact.org/national](http://aact.org/national).



**As Seen Off-Broadway**

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# Break a Leg, Not the Bank: Effective Show Promotion and Advertising

Julie Nemitz, Theatre Marketing Consultant

If you think your theatre can survive on hopes, dreams, and jazz hands alone, I hate to break it to you, but not even Bob Fosse could choreograph his way out of empty seats.

As your friendly AACT marketing expert (who's logged enough theatre hours to recite *Wicked* backward), I'm here to deliver some tough love: community theatres must grow their investments in paid advertising, or we might as well be performing to our cats.

Gone are the days when "if you build it, they will come" worked for theatres. (True, that was actually about baseball, but even Kevin Costner had to deal with marketing, eventually.) Today's entertainment landscape is more crowded than a tech week rehearsal schedule, and your beautiful production of *Our Town* is competing with Netflix, TikTok, and whatever new streaming service just launched while you were reading this sentence.

You're also competing with the largest influx of paid advertising in our history. In 2023, total media ad spending in the United States was \$350 billion, with digital advertising accounting for 74.6% of that total. And you ask your marketing team, "Why isn't anyone seeing our social media posts?" That's why.

Let's look at some sobering statistics: many community theatres report attendance has been declining, with a number of venues reporting 20-30% drops in ticket sales. They still struggle to return to ticket-sale numbers from 2018 and 2019. Yet, when I ask theatres about their marketing budgets, they often respond with the same embarrassment as if I'd caught them singing "Memory" in the shower!

Here's the truth: relying solely on organic social media posts, desperately hopeful press releases, and your board member's cousin's Facebook share is not a marketing strategy—it's wishful thinking. The myth of "we can't afford advertising" needs to exit stage left, because the reality is you can't afford *not* to advertise.

So, let's talk numbers that won't make your treasurer faint. A healthy marketing budget for a community theatre should be between 15-26% of your annual operating budget. Before you gasp dramatically, remember that empty seats cost more than advertising ever will.

Let's look at what a general ad strategy looks like for a production.



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## Your Marketing Timeline

### 3 Months Out:

- Show-specific campaign development
- Target previous single-ticket buyers from similar productions
- Launch initial digital advertising tests (awareness phase)

### 6 Weeks Out:

- Full campaign rollout (awareness phase continues)
- Multi-channel advertising begins
- Heavy digital push

### 3 Weeks Out:

- Increase ad frequency (consideration phase)
- Retargeting campaigns

### Week of Show:

- Retargeting campaigns (conversion phase)
- Last-minute ticket promotions (targeted and segmented audiences)
- Refresh creative messaging

## Your Marketing Mix: Where to Spend

Let's break down where your marketing budget should go—and no, "printing more flyers" isn't the answer. (Though if your flyers could tap dance, we might reconsider.)

- **Paid Social Media (25%):** Facebook and Instagram ads are your chorus line—they do the heavy lifting. Target your audience based on interests, demographics, and previous engagement. Pro tip: If you're doing *Cats*, please resist the urge to only target cat owners.
- **Streaming Video (15%):** Place ads on streaming platforms like Hulu, YouTube TV, and local streaming news. These platforms offer the targeting of digital with the impact of television.
- **Streaming Audio (10%):** Spotify, Pandora, and podcast ads reach audiences while they're commuting, working, or (let's be honest) avoiding work.
- **Google Ads (10%):** When people search "things to do this weekend" or "local theatre," you want to appear faster than an eager understudy.
- **Display Advertising (5%):** Use retargeting ads that follow your website visitors around the internet like a persistent stage mother. They work.
- **Email Marketing (5%):** Yes, you should pay for a proper email service. Your stage manager's Excel spreadsheet from 2015 doesn't count.

## Digital First, But Not Digital-only

While digital advertising should take the lion's share of your budget (aim for 60-70%), ignoring traditional media is like performing *Singin' in the Rain* without the rain. Your marketing mix should be as diverse as a musical theatre kid's audition book.

### Traditional Media (30-40% of total budget)

- **Print (10%):** Strategic, not scattered. One well-placed ad in your target audience's favorite publication beats a hundred quarter-page ads in random newsletters.
- **Radio (15%):** Local radio isn't dead; it's just waiting for its second act. A good opportunity to reach commuters and local business owners. And they often give lots of perks—like airtime on the station to promote your productions!
- **Outdoor (5-15%):** Location matters more than size. One billboard near your theatre beats three in the middle of nowhere.



## Making Every Dollar Work Harder

Measurement of marketing efforts isn't optional anymore. Just as you wouldn't skip dress rehearsal, you shouldn't skip tracking your marketing results.

Essential metrics to track:

- Cost per ticket sale
- Return on ad spend (ROAS)
- Website traffic sources
- Email open and click rates
- Social media engagement-to-conversion rates

Pro tip: Google Analytics is free and more valuable than that box of donated costumes from the 1980s. Make sure it's capturing both your website and Meta (Facebook and Instagram) traffic and insights.

## Building (and Keeping) Audiences

Think of audience development like casting a show: you need a mix of reliable veterans and fresh faces. Allocate your advertising budget accordingly:

- 50% to attract new audiences
- 30% to retain current patrons
- 20% to win back lapsed attendees

## Practical Tips for Implementation

Quick Wins:

1. Start small, but start now. Test \$100 on Facebook ads before committing to larger budgets.
2. Use your audience data. What shows sold best last season—and why? Target similar demographics.
3. Create a simple dashboard to track results. What gets measured gets funded.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid:

- Don't spread your budget too thin
- Avoid changing strategies before giving them time to work
- Never skip testing and measuring results
- Don't assume what worked last season will work this season

## The Final Bow

Remember, marketing today is as crucial to your theatre's success as your lighting design. (And yes, I know you're still using some instruments from the 1970s, but that's a discussion for another day.)

Your community theatre brings magic to your area, but even magic needs a marketing budget. Start small if you must, but start somewhere. Test, measure, adjust, and watch your audience grow. Because at the end of the day, the only thing better than a standing ovation is a standing ovation from a full house.

## Resources to Keep Learning:

- Local small business or Chamber of Commerce marketing workshops
- Your local arts council (they often have grants for marketing initiatives)

- Training and coaching support from me in the Theatre Marketing Lab!

Remember, to paraphrase Stephen Sondheim, "the path to ticket sales isn't always a straight line. Sometimes you have to go into the woods to come out with a full house."

Now, go forth and advertise—your audiences are waiting and on their phones.

[*Spotlight* readers can get \$100 off Theatre Marketing Lab's *Merrily We Roll Out: The Season Reveal Launch Plan Program*. Just \$47 by using code AAC-T4U. Learn more and enroll at [julienemitz.com/classes-and-workshops](http://julienemitz.com/classes-and-workshops)]



*Julie Nemitz is a marketing expert who's shaking things up in the world of live theatre. She is the founder of Theatre Marketing Lab, a consultancy dedicated to helping theatre artists and organizations grow audiences and amplify their work in the digital space—with a big dose of content marketing magic and a whole lot of innovative brand strategy. Julie is passionate about working with theatre makers, coaching them to harness the power of marketing to build their theatre's brand. She also serves as adjunct faculty at Western Michigan University teaching Theatre Arts Marketing to the next generation of artists.*

## Two Key Marketing Concepts

### Ad Testing & Measurement

Marketers use testing to evaluate and improve their ads before launching an advertising campaign. Testing involves showing ads to a representative sample of your target audience and then gathering response data to measure the ads' effectiveness. The goal is to ensure that the ad you send to your entire target audience delivers the intended message, enhances engagement, and improves sales. For more information, visit [digitalmarketinginstitute.com/](http://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/).

### Retargeting

In general, retargeting is a digital marketing strategy that involves advertising to people who have previously interacted with your theatre company—by visiting your website (to purchase tickets, for example) or connecting via social media platforms. More specifically, "retargeting ads" follow customers around the internet—in the case of a theatre company, reminding them about you and your offerings by displaying ads on other sites they visit across the web. This is accomplished via tracking cookies placed on their browser when they first visit your site. For a more in-depth look, visit [funnel.io/blog/retargeting](http://funnel.io/blog/retargeting).



# Spreading It Around

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# From Adversity to Opportunity

Katrina Ploof, AACT *Spotlight* Editorial Team

As theatre leaders, we have all “hit the wall,” slamming into an emergency or a crisis so hard that we think to ourselves, “It’s impossible—my theatre will never come back from this.” Certainly COVID-19 was an experience of uncertainty common to all of us as we worked through that astonishing time together.

However, what happens when we are alone in our challenges, when our theatre is tested in ways both public and private, where we have feared for its very survival? It is in those moments that we ask ourselves how we can transform that fear into action. How do we turn the challenges into another part of our journey, embrace the changes, and grow this experience into something filled with new possibilities? Ultimately, can we not just survive, but thrive?

AACT member theatres continue to prove that the answer to that last question is a resounding “Yes!”

That’s even the case when a theatre has to start over, when all that has been accomplished is wiped out in a day. Case in point: In 2007, South Carolina’s Rock Hill Little Theatre (now the Rock Hill Theatre) lost its venue and all of its historical archive in a fire. Since then, this beloved community theatre, which was founded in 1954 as the Piedmont Players, has occupied close to 10 different venues. While struggling to find a permanent home amid financial and other pressures, it has continued to produce, as well as launching an appeal to replace its archives. With a reach that has extended far beyond Rock Hill, 15 years later the theatre continues to receive playbills, posters, and photos from far and wide that document more than 70 years of productions. Besides the reclaiming of precious items once thought lost, the outreach has reconnected Rock Hill Theatre with friends from all over the nation who remember their experiences in that theatre community with great affection.

Often a potential disaster can turn into an unexpected blessing. On a February morning in 2013, a team of volunteers arrived early at their theatre to complete the preparations for what they all assumed would be an exciting tech week for the much-anticipated production of *Les Misérables*. They were looking forward to putting the finishing touches on the complicated scenic design, but instead

were greeted by a mostly empty stage, barely completed scenery, and a cryptic note left on the technical director’s desk, reading, “I quit.” With less than 24 hours before the final rehearsals that would set the play on course to open as scheduled, all seemed hopeless. Then, the theatre’s executive director made a few phone calls, and within three hours the building was filled with more help than the company could have possibly dreamed of. At one point, volunteers included two other executive directors, three artistic directors, four professional scenic designers, and an army of painters and carpenters, all working on the stage.

The play opened as scheduled, but there was a benefit even bigger than the successful run. The relationships established during the crisis lasted well into the next 10 years, and beyond, bringing new friends, new fans, and people that could be counted on. In the end, said the theatre’s executive director, “It was the best thing that could have happened to us.”

Another story of community (and having the right people in the right place at the right time), comes from the Wetumpka Depot Players, in Wetumpka, Alabama. This hard-working group had been homeless for too many years when they were finally able to purchase its current home in 2000. It wasn’t exactly a glamorous spot: the dilapidated remains of an old grocery store and butcher shop in the heart of the city’s historical district. It wasn’t all bad—the building had some charm, lots of square footage and parking. But it smelled. Bad. Too many decades of storing raw meat had, it seemed, made its way into the walls of the place. But weeks of hard work by the board and volunteers, and gallons of Clorox later, the new home was finally close to opening.

But we all know how these things go, so cue the gloomy music here, because the theatre ran out of funds close to the opening of its first show. Knowing it had to sacrifice something to get into operation, the theatre decided to forego the elevated seating that had been planned from the outset. Everyone was just going to have to sit at floor level for a year or so. And then, after a successful opening, the theatre got an unexpected gift from several business leaders who had decided that floor-level seating wasn’t going to do. Within two months, between the first and second show in their new venue, the Players had their elevated seating, courtesy of a supportive and determined community. The space was turned into a real theatre. And it smelled great, too.

It’s no secret that an unexpected loss of funds, internal strife, or acts of God can bring a small, community-driven organization to its knees. But how does one lead a theatre through profound loss and grief? That was the challenge when, in July of 2009, the small but mighty Bay Street Players in Eustis, Florida, faced the sudden tragic loss of a beloved young volunteer, Julia Vatter. A theatre kid from a young age, Julia had grown up on the Bay Street stage, and was stage managing a production at the time of her passing. It was a deeply personal loss for a grief-stricken family and their theatre community. But as Julia’s dad, Bernie, put in his 2018 Ted Talk, “We learned the meaning of community.”

In her memory, Julia’s friends put a memorial chair backstage for the remainder of the run. Then they did it again, and this time, decorated it. Other theatres around the country (over 75 in the first year) jumped in, including chairs for Julia in Broadway theatres and national tours of *Wicked*, *Next to Normal*, *Rent*, and *Mamma Mia*.





Today, the number of Julia's chairs is in the hundreds. A small gesture from a deeply wounded group became a nationwide movement and cast light into the darkness that continues to shine 15 years later.

Leadership through crisis is never easy and there is no single response. Transforming the bad times into something positive uses every muscle we have—it requires super-human strength and a commitment to honoring growth and new possibilities. We're all wise enough to know that spinning sh\*t into gold doesn't always happen.

But we also know that the very action of trying, the doing of it, is in itself a way to the future—the new normal for our theatre and our people.

[For more information about Julia's chairs, check out Bernie Vatter's TED Talk via [tinyurl.com/JuliasChairsTED](https://tinyurl.com/JuliasChairsTED) or search for Julia's Chairs on Facebook. To contribute to the Rock Hill Theatre archive, visit [rockhilltheatre.org](https://rockhilltheatre.org).]



*Katrina Ploof is a native of the great state of Maine, the daughter of a music teacher and a vocalist. In the past 40 years, she has directed, choreographed, or coached over 250 productions in the U.S. and Canada, including works by Chekov, Shaw, Sondheim, Ibsen, Wilder, Wasserstein, and McNally. She has adjudicated theatre festivals throughout the U.S. and Canada for over 20 years. Katrina is also a published playwright and has been a member of the Lincoln Center Theatre Directors Laboratory since 2000.*

## New Roles




**R. Wayne Shields-Hogue** has been named Executive Director at **Playhouse in the Park** in Murray, Kentucky.

Before joining the Playhouse in June 2024, Wayne served as an adjunct instructor, administrative assistant, and guest director at Murray State University, where he received his undergraduate degree in theatre arts. In December 2024, he will graduate with a Master of Arts in Teaching Theatre Artistry from Wayne State University.

Passionate about theatre, community engagement, and diversity in the arts, Wayne actively seeks to create inclusive spaces for artists and audiences alike. He believes that theatre can be a powerful catalyst for social change and cultural dialogue, and strives to make Playhouse in the Park a welcoming environment for all members of the community.

In addition to his work at the Playhouse, Wayne continues his professional development in intimacy directing, furthering his commitment to theatre, community, and education. He also is exploring a post-graduate interest in universal instructional design, to identify better ways to ensure access and programming in the community.



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- Town Without Pity – The Love Songs of Gene Pitney
- Bonnie & Clyde
- Club Morocco

**PLAYS:**

- Dracula - The Case of the Silver Scream (Film Noir)
- The Incredible Jungle Journey of Fenda Maria
- Casa Blue—The Last Moments in the Life of Freda Kahlo
- Vampire Monologues
- War of the Worlds

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# A Tradition of Fiddler

Mary Doveton, *Spotlight* Editorial Team

Tradition! From Regent's Park in London to the plains of Oklahoma, *Fiddler on the Roof* celebrated its 60th Anniversary in grand style. For a show that opened in September of 1964 with an uncertain future, the musical is unique in its ability to fuel theatre seasons on both community and professional levels, with a ranking in the top 10 productions of community theatre—last season *and* this season. According to John Prignano, Chief Operating Officer and Director of Education Development at Music Theatre International, *Fiddler on the Roof* is a perennial favorite that is consistently among MTT's most popular shows.

Based on the stories of Sholem Aleichem about Tevye the dairyman, and his daughters, the unlikely material came to the Broadway stage via Joseph Stein, Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, and Jerome Robbins, and stayed there for over 3500 performances, while playing and continuing to play in cities and cultures across the world.

While grounded in Jewish life and traditions from the early 1900s, the show's universal themes of family, community, and constant change continue to strike chords within all of us. There is an acceptance of tradition, while at the same time the acknowledgement of a need for change. We see the ability to accept who we are, while also accepting one another. There is friction between generations as well, authored not only by Sholem Aleichem, but also by the culture of the time in which the musical was written, imbued with the spirit of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement. The show's messages continue to speak to our daily experiences.

From the perspective of craft—and my experience as a director—I believe that few shows offer better opportunities for actors of every age and ability level to intimately explore roles and their relationships to others who are on the stage with them. Family, community,



Lillie Taylor, Chloe Kennedy Paris, Mark Frie, Kim Frie and the ensemble in the Tulsa Performing Arts Center's production

friends, foes inhabit the little Ukrainian village of Anatevka, and their relationships provide rich material for all cast members to examine, no matter what size role they have. As villagers of all ages, they can explore how they feel about one another, what their trades are, what they are having for Sabbath dinner, and where they will go when they leave Anatevka. This is an incredible journey to take with a cast.

Each production also bears the stamp of the community where it is presented. I had the opportunity to visit with several recent directors of the show, and they were universally enthusiastic about the benefits to their actors, their audiences, their communities, and their bottom lines. While each production was different and all the directors had so much to share, their common advice on approaching the show was to respect the material and not cheat on the Bottle Dance!

Tulsa Performing Arts Center chose to emphasize the color and vibrancy of the show, retaining a deep respect for its Jewish traditions. Di-



Kevin McNair

*The Bottle Dance from the Curtain Call, Inc. production*

rector Sara Bingman Phoenix describes her approach as focusing on the joy and humanity of the Jewish people by weaving a tapestry through scenic design and light that reflected traditional Ukrainian textiles and embroidery. She also stressed the need to genuinely understand the materials, treat them with respect, and give special attention to the details of the culture. A local rabbi and a curator from a Jewish Museum helped educate her cast, and in the show's final scene, a contemporary woman witnessed the exodus from the stage, picked up the violin, and as she faced the audience, revealed a blue and yellow shirt with a peace sign.

Lou Ursone at Curtain Call, Inc. in Connecticut felt strongly that it was important to his audiences to maintain a very traditional *Fiddler*, with the original Jerome Robbins choreography. He writes, "A patron at yesterday's *Tootsie* matinee stopped me to say *Fiddler* was their first time at our theater, based on a neighbor's recommendation of it being a solid, normal (their words) production that we didn't try to update or change. And they're new subscribers now."

He noted that many of his company members were Jewish and felt a particular importance in telling the story as it was originally presented. While the theatre loves taking older shows and looking at them through a different lens, for this one, it was played very conservatively.

For me, working on the Theatre Lawrence thrust stage in Kansas presented both special challenges and opportunities in staging. Using the strong colors of Marc Chagall's paintings, the stage initially filled with joy and light, then gradually grew darker and more somber. Because we were working in a thrust space, I wanted to stage the dream scene in a way that would be visually exciting from all seats. I asked our tech director, James Diemer, about using very large rod puppets to appear behind the actors portraying the "ghosts" of Fruma Sarah





Monica Dennington as Fruma Sarah and the Ensemble for the Dream Scene in the Theatre Lawrence production

and Grandma Tzeitel. He delivered by printing oversized realistic 3D masks which were engineered onto “heads” attached to dowel rods and costumed like the actors. Fully assembled, the puppets were about 12 feet tall, requiring three operators. Tevye and Golde’s bed could also be moved around the stage and could spin, so the overall effect with lights and haze was truly special. [See photo above]

Our thrust stage also gave us an important opportunity to “define” Anatevka, with family and community members using only upstage entries and exits, while the Russians used only the downstage exits. Short stretches of fencing and posts served to further define boundaries. These elements created a strong sense of place, which was broken only at the end of the show, when each family group exited downstage with their bags and bundles.

As with the Tulsa production, the Market House Theatre in Paducah, Kentucky, referenced the current war in Ukraine in the opening and closing scenes. Director Michael Cochran writes, “I told the audience that beginning the play in our present day was a reminder that inside each of us we carry our ancestors and their memories [as they] struggled, often with just as many challenges to their culture and their world as modern audiences face today. Our LED wall at the back of our stage allowed us to transform the constructivist setting into a damaged railway station of 2024, and then into Anatevka of 1905. [Photo at right] Beginning with an air raid siren, a man in a modern coat walked on stage and looked around as the sirens faded in silence. He sat for a moment and then stood and took off his modern coat, revealing his Tevye costume as the sound of the violin began.”

At the end of the show Tevye was left alone on stage, and “in silence he walked back over to the bench where he had left his coat at the

beginning, put it on, and then slowly walked upstage until the sound of the violin made him stop and turn around. He then waved to the Fiddler to join him, and they both walked upstage and off in silence. The audience responded very powerfully with silence until the curtain-call music and the lights came up.”

Michael liked the way this approach connected the show to our modern world and the changing cultural values and conflicts we face. At the same time, he also honored the script “by not adding a single word to the opening or closing, but giving it a powerful image to transport us back in time.”

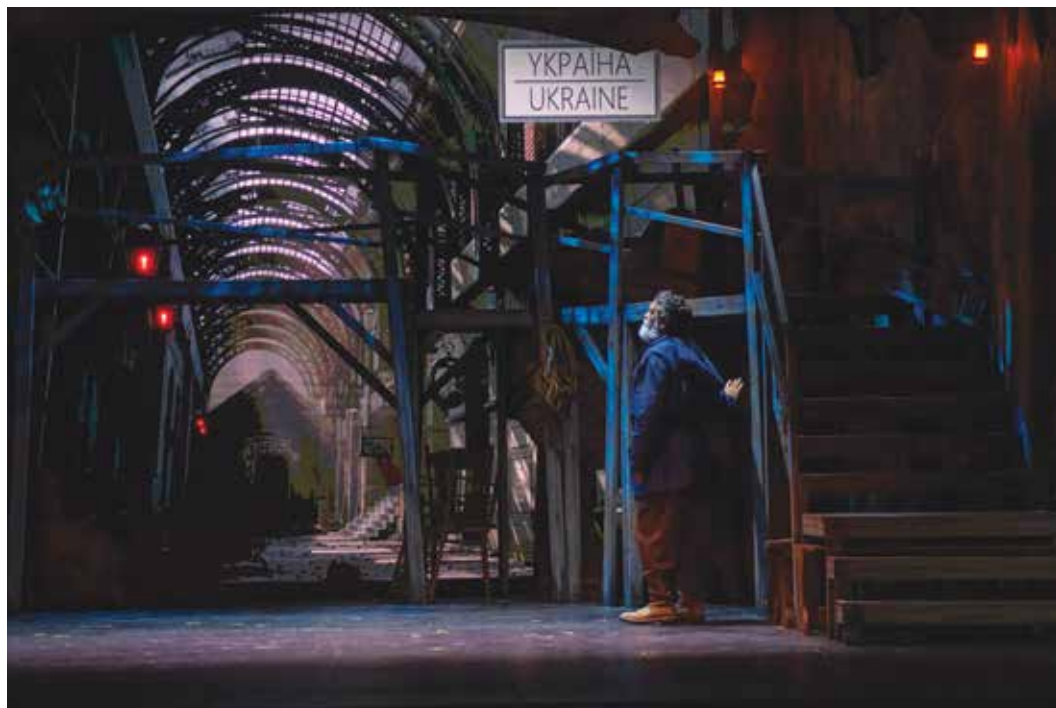
These four different visions of *Fiddler on the Roof* from across our country demonstrate both the viability and vitality of this classic piece. It is the universality of the show’s themes that make that possible.

Why do we keep doing this show? Well, it’s important, for one thing, and strange as it may seem to us, many in our audiences have never seen *Fiddler*. Some may have seen the movie a long time ago, or heard the music, but as Michael Cochran points out, “Each new generation finds a brand-new experience in seeing *Fiddler*. I think the shows that stand the test of time always have something new for us to discover each time we do them. We may jump to the new and shiny musicals, but we also know that classic shows from the past continue to sustain both artists and audiences—and our bottom line.”



Mary Doveton is founder and Executive Director Emerita at Theatre Lawrence (Kansas), past AACT Board Member, an AACT Fellow, and a member of the AACT Spotlight Editorial Team.

Caleb Buford



Chris Black as Tevye in train station scene in the Market House Theatre production. Chris Black played Tevye 33 years ago and reprised the role to wrap up the Market House Theatre’s 60th season.

# Rights for “Pay What You Will” Performances

Michael Cochran, AACT Board of Directors and *Spotlight* Editorial Team

The theatre I work for offers a “Pay What You Will Preview” performance for each of our shows, from our regular run. As with any performance with an audience, rights and royalties are involved, but initially, it wasn’t clear to me how to proceed. I decided the best way to get answers was to reach out to my licensing representatives at the royalty houses.

Here are responses from Dramatic Publishing and Music Theatre International.

## Dramatic Publishing

Carrie Blomquist, Professional Leasing Director

*Dramatic Publishing charges amateur theatres a per-performance rate based on the average ticket price. There is a section in our application to provide notes regarding ticket pricing and structure. A customer might write: “Seven of our performances are at an average rate of \$20 per ticket. The last performance is a ‘Pay What You Can’ structure, and historically we have been receiving an average of \$15 per ticket for those performances.”*

*We typically factor that into the average ticket price for the run. However, there have been times where it made more sense to have two separate royalty rates for the two types of ticket pricing. We just always recommend that if you are in doubt, reach out to us directly. Our Amateur Leasing Director, Brianna Young, is always willing to discuss rates and applications with our customers and is very prompt in her response time.*

## Music Theatre International

John Prignano, Chief Operating Officer and Director of Education and Development, and Eric McCowan, Executive Assistant

*Our licensing teams are always happy to work with customers on their license offers and royalties. If there are ever any questions about their royalties,*

*customers can always call or email us to discuss. Typically for “Pay What You Will” productions, we will base the royalties on the “suggested donation” price. However, that does not always work the same way for each group. Sometimes there is a “minimum donation price,” while other times the performance is essentially free but attendees can make an optional donation to the organization. If there is a minimum donation price, then that would be what we base the royalties on. If the performances are free, however, we can work with that instead. Further complicating things is that, based on the organization type, there may be different rate structures. Customers may also use a Guarantee vs Percentage structure.*

With the changing landscape of pricing—from free, to pay what you will, to fixed-royalty, companies are working hard to make sure that they give theatres the best quotes they can. In this age of online royalty quotes, sometimes it’s still best if you pick up the phone and talk to the representative when you’re not sure how to answer the questions in the online form.

Developing a relationship with your licensing rep has the added benefit of giving you a go-to person to talk to when you have a show that doesn’t sell, or if you have to cancel or change a planned performance run.



Michael Cochran is Executive Director at Market House Theatre (MHT) in Paducah, Kentucky. Now marking his 41st year with MHT, he also serves on the AACT Board of Directors, and is a past board member of Arts KY and the Kentucky Theatre Association.

# Spotlight Award Honors Victoria Kristy



AACT congratulates **Victoria Kristy**, founder and Artistic Director of Sunriver Stars Community Theater in Sunriver, Oregon, on receiving an AACT Spotlight Award. Presented in collaboration with AACT and a member theatre, Spotlight Awards recognize long-standing or extraordinary service that has greatly enhanced the quality of local theatre.

Victoria’s incredible journey began in 2012 when she founded the all-volunteer Sunriver theatre from the ground up—recruiting the board of directors, securing memberships with AACT and the Oregon Community Theatre Association, and successfully obtaining her theatre’s nonprofit status.

Over 12 remarkable seasons, she has led the company in producing 40 shows, featuring over 100 talented adult and child actors. During that time, the theater has never experienced a financial loss for any production, and Victoria has reinvested funds into acquiring professional-grade lighting, sound, microphone equipment, and staging, to enhance the quality of the performances.

Six years ago, Victoria recognized the need for youth programs in her community, and launched a free Children’s Summer Drama Camp

for kindergarten through eighth grade students. Since then, 70 children have participated each year in the week-long program, which culminates in a showcase performance for their families, followed by a celebratory reception.

This year, Victoria invited professional Broadway actor Patrick Osteen to lead a free program that offers aspiring performers the opportunity to explore the art of acting, or sharpen their skills. She has also introduced a free Tech Camp for high school students, who learn the ins and outs of sound and lighting equipment, as well as the essentials of producing and directing a play.

Victoria Kristy’s vision, passion, and dedication have transformed Sunriver Stars Community Theater into a beacon of creativity and community spirit, an achievement that AACT celebrates in presenting her with this well-deserved honor.

*Announced by AACT, and presented locally, AACT’s Spotlight Award allows member theatres across the nation to recognize special local achievement. Any individual, organization, or company is eligible. Nominations are accepted for persons of all ages. Awards may be presented any time throughout the year that is appropriate. This is a fitting tribute to the hardworking volunteers, staff, and patrons of local community theatre groups—an AACT tradition and service since 2000. More information at [aact.org/spotlight-award](http://aact.org/spotlight-award)*



# From Community Theatre to Broadway Star

Lou Ursone, AACT Board of Directors and *Spotlight* Editorial Team

With the oft-produced *Fiddler on the Roof*, showing up even more frequently now during its current 60th anniversary year (see story on page 38), it may be no surprise that a community theatre production of the musical was life-changing for one family—and one daughter, specifically.

Her name? Julie Benko.

If you're not familiar with Benko, she recently marched her band out on Broadway as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*, skyrocketing to fame and joining the annals of theatrical lore for her sensational understudy-to-star trajectory in the show. Between her tenure as standby, alternate, and full-time Fanny, she played the role over 180 times (1 in every 3 performances!) and received numerous accolades for her interpretation, including *Theatre World's* Dorothy Loudon Award for Excellence in the Theatre.

But it all began when she was 14 years old, appearing as Hodel in *Fiddler on the Roof*—her first community theatre production. In that moment, Benko found her life's calling. "That show changed everything," Benko said, "not just for me, but our whole family."

Both parents and her younger sister were part of the production at a local Jewish Community Center in Connecticut, as well. Later, she portrayed Lizzie in *Baby*, alongside her father at the Curtain Call Theatre in Stamford, Connecticut. It was during the run of *Baby* that she auditioned for the first national tour of *Spring Awakening*, all while she was getting ready to start college at New York University (NYU). She got the part.

After her work in *Spring Awakening*, she joined the 25th anniversary tour of *Les Misérables* as an ensemble member and understudy for the role of Cosette, ultimately taking over the role full time. Benko also played multiple Off-Broadway and regional roles, and from 2015 to 2016, was the understudy for both Hodel and Chava in the Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof*.



Julie Benko

Named the "2022 Breakout Star for Theater" by the *New York Times*, Benko was also included in *Variety's* "10 Broadway Stars to Watch in 2023," honored as one of "40 Under 40" for *Crain's New York Business*, hailed by *CBS Mornings* as "Broadway's breakout star," and profiled in numerous national media outlets.

In the fall of 2023, she originated her first role on Broadway, playing Ruth in the Barry Manilow/Bruce Sussman musical *Harmony*.

But let's go back to the beginning. When that community theatre production of *Fiddler* closed, Benko says the show's professional director "sat me and my parents down, and told me that if I wanted a career as an actor, I could have it. That was the first time I ever really thought seriously about performing as a profession."

Reflecting on her community theatre experiences, Benko said that it provided "a community unlike any other I can think of. Rarely does an activity bond people across so many different demographics, all working toward a common goal. Skills learned—like collaboration, how to challenge yourself and face your fears—are all part of participating in theatre, and I don't think those specific opportunities exist in many other environments."

In between her professional work, Benko managed to complete her degree at NYU, explaining that, "In my family, not getting a college degree was simply not an option. Also, I just like learning and being in a scholarly environment, so it wasn't some huge sacrifice to be in school. I love school." She also explains that she didn't want to feel stuck in the decision she made

*continued on page 42* ▶



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Community Theatre to Broadway Star continued from page 41

to pursue life as a professional actor when she was 19 years old. Her survival job (as a SAT/ACT tutor) required a college degree—and it supported her for 10 years while working (and not working) as an actor. She only stopped that work during *Funny Girl*.

Benko later returned to NYU for a Master's degree.

"There were a lot of factors that went into that decision to go back to school," she said. "The fact is, you're never done learning and growing as an artist, but it's very hard to do that in the business, because you're so rarely afforded an opportunity to audition for something that's outside your wheelhouse. Your reps will submit you for things they know you have a great chance of booking—so you're always working on stuff you're already good at. Grad school was three years of actively stepping away to develop pieces of my craft that I was bad at. It made me so much better. I want to have

a broader career, working in TV, film, straight plays, Shakespeare. It's frustrating to be considered only for musicals."



Julie at the August Wilson Theatre on Broadway

Summing up her grad school experience, Benko said her time in grad school "was the single most useful thing I've ever done for my growth. I've learned plenty on the job, but I really found my voice and honed my craft in that program, and it made me feel ready

for anything. I don't think I would have found the success I did in *Funny Girl* or felt ready for creating my first role on Broadway in *Harmony*, without that training."

Benko has learned, a start in community theatre is common with most professional performers. One important aspect, which she thinks sets community theatre apart from doing school shows, is the opportunity to play age-appropriate roles against age-appropriate older actors. In other words, "You're not playing a daughter to a high school senior as your father."

And what of the other three Benko family members? Her dad has gone on to appear in numerous community theatre productions with various companies, and is currently Board President of his hometown community theatre. And yes, he has even done *Fiddler* again, moving up from ensemble the first time, to playing Lazar Wolf in 2015.

Benko's sister, Allison, has focused on producing, directing and writing. She currently is Associate Producer at Brooklyn's Theatre for a New Audience, an Off-Broadway theatre focusing on the classics, and recently had an industry reading of her new musical, *Dear Ruth*.

And mom, Gail? *Fiddler* remains her sole performance credit, but she holds the record of having seen *Funny Girl*, with daughter Julie as Fanny Brice, nearly 100 times!

Clearly, community theatre has been central to the lives of the entire Benko family—just as it has for so many others over the decades.

It's a good place to be—and be from.

[Author's note: During the table read for that 2003 production of *Fiddler*, Julie sang "Far from the Home I Love" to me as Tevye and I was a mess...it was abundantly clear that she was something special. A few years later, I was able to share the stage with her (and her dad) in *Baby* here at Curtain Call, and as much as my friends and family commented nicely about my performance, everyone raved about the performance and presence of "that young girl." I was thrilled to see her in *Spring Awakening* and was totally *verklemt*—as any proud Papa would be—at her opening night as Fanny Brice on Broadway. And she's not slowing down: even as we spoke, at eight months pregnant, Benko has a busy cabaret performance schedule.]



Lou Ursone is the Executive Director of Curtain Call, Inc. in Stamford, Connecticut, a member of the AACT Board of Directors, and serves on the Spotlight Editorial Team.



# Changes to Overtime Laws May Affect Your Organization

Lynn Nelson, AACT Board of Directors

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has recently implemented new regulations regarding payment of overtime under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).

Many AACT member theatres employ workers who are considered exempt from overtime regulations. However, these new standards may change that, resulting in a significant economic impact on your organization.

## FLSA Basics for Full- and Part-time Employees

The Fair Labor Standards Act sets standards for minimum wage, overtime pay, record-keeping, and youth employment. It applies to full-time and part-time employees across private sector and government entities at federal, state, and local levels.

Congress passed the FLSA in 1938 to protect workers, setting a minimum wage and requiring extra pay for overtime work. Since then, the DOL has frequently updated regulations in the law in order to reflect current economic conditions and work practices. An example of this is raising the federal minimum hourly wage, which was \$0.25 an hour in 1938 (\$4.15 in 2024 dollars) and has raised that rate more than 20 times since, to the current minimum rate of \$7.25 an hour.

All theatres must pay full-time and part-time employees the federal minimum wage rate or their state's minimum wage rate (many states have a higher minimum rate than the federal minimum). They must also pay overtime rates to employees who work more than 40 hours in a week. These regulations apply only to those who are employed and receive a W-2 from your organization.

## Employees Exempt from Overtime

An employee may be exempt from the overtime rules if they meet the strict guidelines for determining if they are eligible for that status.

Workers who are executive, administrative, or professional may be exempt, but must also meet a minimum annual salary requirement. Meeting the salary requirement is certainly not the only requirement for determining exemption status. To remain compliant with the law, make sure you have job descriptions for all employees that outline duties, education requirements, decision-making capabilities, etc. Consult with an attorney or local human resources professional to get assistance with accurately determining exempt status.

## Changes and What You Need to Do About Them

In early 2024, the minimum salary threshold for an exempt employee was \$35,568 a year. In July 2024, that was raised to \$43,888 a year. There was also a proposal to raise the threshold again in January 2025, to \$58,656 a year. It is important to stay abreast of developments with issues like this—which is why many theatres find it helpful to have an attorney on their board.

If you have a salaried employee who meets all the requirements for exempt status, and they do not meet the minimum salary threshold, you must raise their salary to the minimum. Or you may convert them to an hourly status and pay overtime when appropriate. If you know how many times your employee works more than 40 hours a week, it is relatively easy to do a financial analysis. Sometimes, it is more beneficial to maintain the exempt status if they otherwise qualify and pay them a higher wage. (Those 75-hour production weeks are killers, aren't they?)

In order to remain in compliance with the law, these are the steps I would recommend taking:

1. Review your employee job descriptions and confirm whether their status should be hourly or salaried/exempt. It is good

practice to periodically review your job descriptions for accuracy. Job duties and responsibilities often change over time.

2. Consult with an attorney or HR professional if you need help in determining if your job description analysis is accurate. Many cities have Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) chapters, and members are sometimes willing to do pro bono work for nonprofits.
3. If you have an employee who is accurately classified, but who doesn't meet the wage threshold, do a financial analysis to determine your best course of action. The DOL will never penalize you if you make an exempt employee hourly. However, they certainly may penalize and/or fine you if you do not classify or pay an employee properly.
4. If you move an employee to an hourly status, realize that some employees take great pride in what they consider a higher step on their career ladder by being an exempt employee. They need to know the change is because you (and the law) want to make sure they receive fair pay for all their work. It is not a step down on the career ladder.

In summary, both nonprofit and professional theatres must adhere to federal and state laws pertaining to pay and HR issues. Make sure your theatre stays abreast of those laws and regulations. Consequences of not adhering to the overtime issues discussed above, or any other legal requirements, could result in having to back-pay overtime to employees, fines, and other penalties. The consequences could be financially catastrophic for your organization.

[This article is intended for informational purposes only, and should not be relied upon for legal advice.]

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## AACT Member Hub

# Valparaiso's Memorial Opera House: An Amazing Past; a Bright Future

Jon Montgomery, AACT Board of Directors and *Spotlight* Editorial Team

Nestled in the heart of Valparaiso, Indiana, the Memorial Opera House stands as a testament to the enduring power of community, creativity, and remembrance. Since its inception in 1893, this 325-seat theatre has been more than just a venue for performances; over the decades it has evolved into a vibrant hub for the arts that serves a three-county area.

## MEMORIAL OPERA HOUSE

Originally lobbied for by Union soldiers as a tribute to their fallen comrades, the Memorial Opera House was designed by architect Charles Lembke, whose vision transformed a simple structure into an architectural gem. The theatre's early years were marked by a dynamic range of performances and personalities, including President Theodore Roosevelt, The March King John Philip Sousa, the Marx Brothers, and future film character actress Beulah Bondi, a local girl who appeared as Little Lord Fauntleroy when she was just eight years old.



*Valparaiso's Memorial Opera House in 1917*

By the mid-20th century, however, the Opera House had fallen into disuse and disrepair. Then a passionate local theatre guild rallied to save the beloved venue. Their efforts culminated in the first major renovation in the 1960s, followed by a second in the 1990s, when the county took over operations. Today, the venue continues to thrive, operating under a \$600K annual budget that relies heavily on the support

of its subscribers, ticket sales, and a full bar, along with funding from the Memorial Opera House Foundation.

Recent years have seen a remarkable transformation, culminating in a \$5 million renovation, funded by the Foundation and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (also called the Covid-19 Stimulus). Comprehensive upgrades included enhancements to mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems, as well as new seating and improved lobby and lounge spaces.

Executive Director Scot MacDonald describes the renovated space as "more luxurious, with better traffic flow and brighter aesthetics, making it not just a theatre, but a welcoming environment for events, gatherings, and meetings."

The renovation also prioritized accessibility, ensuring that all patrons can enjoy the space safely and comfortably. Future plans include the addition of a new courtyard



*Night view of the Opera House exterior after renovation*

in 2025, further expanding the venue's capacity to host a variety of events.

The Memorial Opera House also serves as a catalyst for community engagement. Programs include the Penguin Project, which supports children with disabilities in exploring their creative talents, and the Limelights Youth Theatre Program, which helps young people develop their creativity, communication, teamwork, and confidence through theatre. In addition, the Theatre for A New Audience initiative reaches out to individuals facing barriers to attendance, fostering a sense of belonging that often leads to deeper community involvement.

The 132-year history of the Memorial Opera House reflects its role as a beacon of the arts, a hub of community activity, and a cherished memorial. As it continues to adapt and grow, it remains a vital part of Valparaiso's cultural landscape, inviting all to partake in the magic of live performance and the power of community.

The re-dedication ceremony in September marked not just the completion of renovations, but a renewed commitment to the ideals that inspired its founding. With ongoing collaborations with the county and city for future renovations, the Memorial Opera House is poised to continue its legacy of creativity, inclusivity, and remembrance for generations to come.



*Jon Montgomery is a Member at Large on the AACT Board of Directors and the Interim Executive Director for the Ellen Noël Art Museum in Odessa, Texas. He previously served as Executive Artistic Director for both The Depot Theatre and Basin Theatre Works.*



*Valparaiso Memorial Opera House interior after the most recent renovations*

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Dates	Event	St	City	Phone	Web Site
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<b>Jan 9-12</b>	Maryland State Festival	MD	Bethesda	301-758-2956	writer.org
<b>Jan 16-19</b>	Mississippi State Festival	MS	Meridian	601-214-6897	msurileycenter.com
<b>Feb 6</b>	AACT Virtual Masterclass: Pissing People Off For Profit (And Fun!)		virtual	817-732-3177	aact.org/masterclass
<b>Feb 7-9</b>	Wisconsin State Festival	WI	Brussels		
<b>Feb 11-15</b>	Washington State Festival	WA	Spokane	509-838-9727	
<b>Feb 20-22</b>	AACT New York Adventure	NY	New York	817-732-3177	aact.org/nyc
<b>Feb 21-22</b>	Idaho State Festival	ID	Lewiston		lctheatre.org
<b>Feb 28-Mar 2</b>	Michigan State Festival	MI	Bay City	989-893-5555	baycityplayers.org

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Roger Bean <i>Sh-Boom!</i> .....	13	Luigi Jannuzzi <i>A Crazy Little Café Called Love</i> .....	19
<i>BINGO The Winning Musical</i> .....	29	<i>Liberty Calls</i> .....	41
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Camille Playhouse .....	3	<i>Mr Bennet's Bride</i> .....	15
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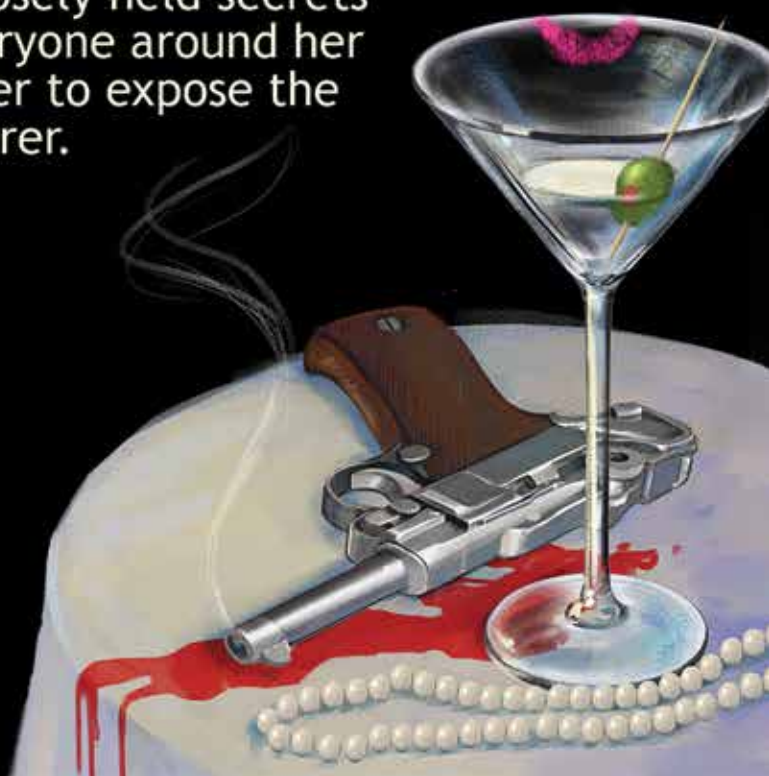


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