



American Association of Community Theatre

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SPOTLIGHT

MAGAZINE



IN THIS ISSUE

AI in the Arts

From Crisis to Connection

Board of Directors Survey

From Paducah to *Shucked*

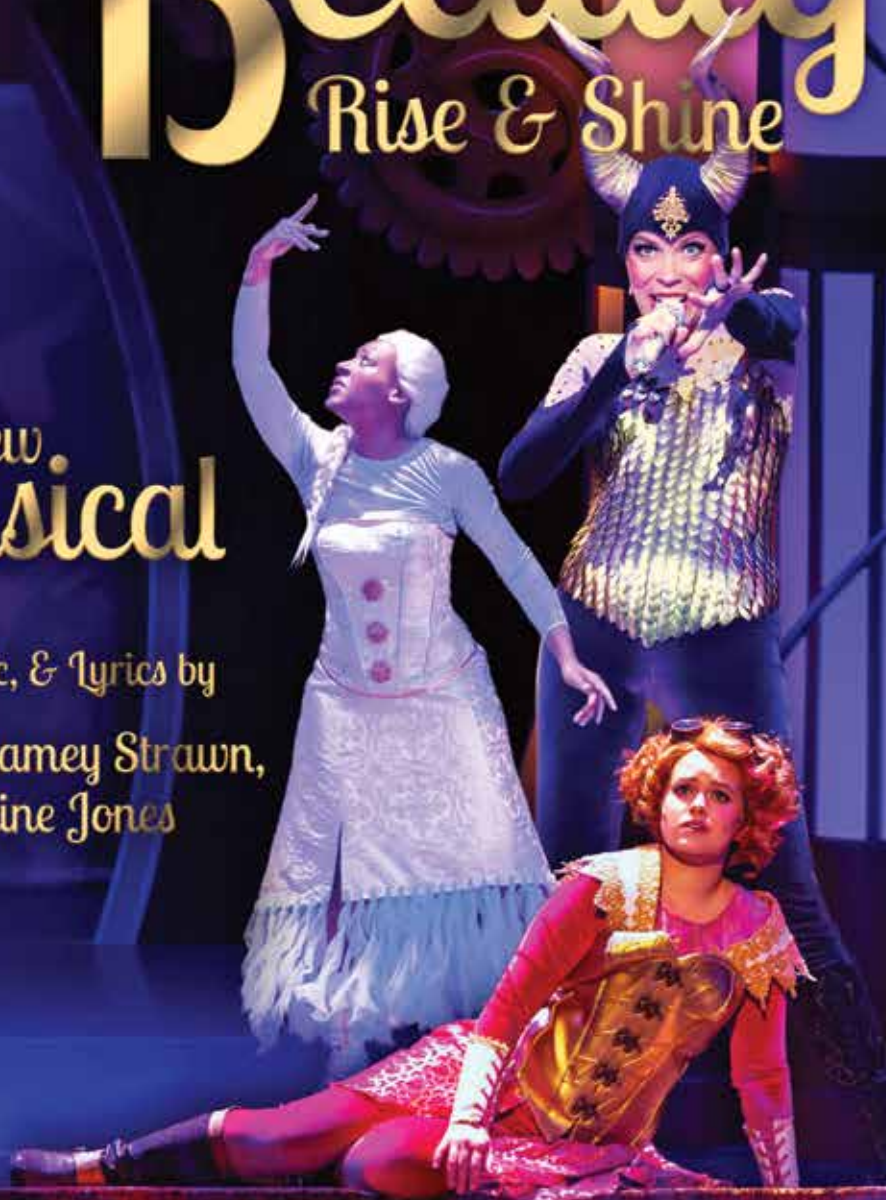
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Kristofer Geddie, AACT President

Spring, to me, has always felt like a promise - of renewal, growth, and “what’s next?”

Across the country our theatres are shaking off winter and stepping into renewed energy—new rehearsals, fresh ideas, brave stories, and full calendars. It’s a season of growth, and nowhere is that more evident than in the work being done by AACT members every day. Thank you to everyone who joined us last month at Hale Centre Theatre as we kicked off work on a new strategic plan—one designed to guide us through the next exciting phase of growth. Our future is bright, and we can’t wait to share the ways we plan to strengthen and support our community.

What continues to inspire me most about our association is not just the scale of what we do—though it’s remarkable—but the heart and humanity behind it. As the arts face obstacles across the nation, from small towns to the Kennedy Center, community theatre remains a place where people belong. It is where young artists’ voices bloom, seasoned volunteers find purpose, and audiences find connection. In a time when the world can feel divided, our theatres continue to invite people to sit side by side and share a story.

So I encourage you: see a new play. Visit a new theatre. Audition for the role you think you’re “not right” for. Volunteer backstage. Share your story!

And yes -I shamelessly invite you to gather with fellow theatricians at **WorldFest in Venice, Florida, June 15–20**. We’ll be welcoming community theatre artists from across the country and around the globe. WorldFest is more than a festival; it’s a celebration of cultural exchange, artistic excellence, and the shared language of theatre. If you’ve never attended, this is the year. If you have, you know how powerful it is to stand in a room where stories transcend borders. (And you’ll get to see our restoration here on the Gulf Coast of Florida). Check out the ad and QR code on page 17 for more information.

Finally, I want to remind you of my personal charge from last year: each of us bringing one new member into the AACT family. Think of a colleague,



PRESIDENT'S LETTER

a volunteer, a young artist, or a board member who would benefit from being part of this national network. Community theatre grows when we invite others to the table—and AACT grows because of you.

As we continue this work, we also want to hear from you. AACT is strongest when our members’ voices help shape our future. Share your successes, your challenges, your questions, and your ideas. Reach out. Write to us. Participate. Your experience helps guide this organization forward and your perspective matters. YOU matter!

Thank you for helping theatre thrive. I cannot wait to see what blooms this year—on all stages!

I'll see you in Venice!

Kris



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On the Cover

Gin Hoffman (Carson) and Gary Demuth (Dale) in Theatre Salina's world premiere of AACT NewPlayFest winner Listen by Brigid Amos
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Upcoming Events

AACT Board Nominations
March 1-13, 2026
aact.org/board-nominations

Community Theatre Management Conference Virtual
April 17-19 and April 24-26, 2026
aact.org/ctmc

AACT Board of Directors & Annual Meetings
June 15-20, 2026
Venice Theater, Venice, Florida
aact.org/calendar

aactWorldfest Registrations Open
Festival Dates - June 15-20, 2026
Venice Theater, Venice, Florida
venicetheatre.org/international

AACT NewPlayFest 2028
Script Submissions, Call for Reviewers
Spring 2026 - *Deadlines vary*
aact.org/newplayfest

AACT 2027 YouthFest Applications
Summer 2026
aact.org/aact-youthfest

AACT Young Playwrights Competition
Spring 2026
Details coming soon!

For full listing upcoming events visit aact.org/calendar

Watch for new online programming this Spring!

Member Roundtables
Peer-to peer discussion and networking
aact.org/roundtables

Virtual Masterclasses
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or topics
aact.org/virtual-masterclasses

Industry Connections
Industry providers showcase their services in
30-minute presentations
aact.org/industry-connections



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.

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Spring into AACT Member Benefits!

For over 35 years, AACT has been dedicated to helping theatres thrive. Whether you are an individual looking for professional development and educational resources, a community theatre looking to network and save on industry services, or someone who just loves community theatre and wants to be a part of a wider theatre family, AACT remains your number-one go-to resource.



2026 is already off to an amazing start, and we don't want you to miss a moment!

- This April, join us from the comfort of your home and save on registration through your AACT Membership on professional development with our Virtual Community Theatre Management Conference (CTMC), or our monthly exclusive AACT Member Roundtables.
- Meet your theatre family in person in Venice, Florida, this June for the return of AACT WorldFest, a celebration of theatre from across the world that is not to be missed.
- And if you are a playwright, be sure to check out our 2028 NewPlayFest cycle, as well as our exclusive new benefit for member playwrights--our AACT Play Database.

Our website (aact.org) is rich with information, and as an AACT member, you have full access to this and other resources, networking, and discounts. aact.org/membership

Join or renew your membership today, get involved with your AACT Family, and be a part of helping theatre thrive. First-time, monthly, and annual membership options are available.

Have questions or need help? Contact our Membership Director, Karen Matheny, at karen@aact.org.





AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY THEATRE
AACT NEWPLAYFEST WINNING PLAYS
VOLUME 6 (2024)



The AACT NewPlayFest was created to develop new original work and spark communication and excitement among community theatres. Over a two-year period, playwrights submit their play to AACT for consideration, and winning scripts receive a world premiere. At the end of the festival, all of the winning plays from the 2023-2024 cycle were published in this anthology.

Included Titles:

Criminal Mischief

By William Cameron

The Red Flags

By Catherine Castellani

I Thought I Knew You

By Phillip J. Kaplan

Eating Blackberries


By Pam Harbaugh

Tennessee Wet Rub

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Letter from the Editor Fresh Look for Spotlight

Andy Snyder

As we open a new year of *Spotlight*, I am pleased to share some exciting news: we are giving the magazine a fresh, updated look.

You will begin to see several design enhancements starting with this issue—our first *Spotlight* publication of 2026—including a new logo on the front cover, a refreshed cover design, and updated department (regular column) headers. Our goal is to create a more cohesive, modern presentation while preserving what readers value most: practical resources, meaningful stories, and strong connections across the community theatre field.

One of the most noticeable updates is an improved Table of Contents, now organized into three theatre-themed sections that make it easier to navigate the issue:

- **Front of House** features AACT-related information, including the President’s Letter, upcoming events, festivals, and important dates.
- **Mainstage** highlights our featured articles—such as Starpower interviews, AACT member survey results, and guest-contributor pieces.
- **Backstage** includes regular columns that appear periodically in *Spotlight*, including Inclusivity in Theatre, Advocacy Matters, Resource Center, Regionally Speaking, and more.

Some of these refinements debut in this Spring issue, and others will roll out gradually as 2026 progresses. We are taking a thoughtful approach, ensuring that the redesign feels both intentional and familiar—an evolution, not a departure.

Thank you for your ongoing support of AACT and *Spotlight* magazine. We look forward to sharing this refreshed experience with you throughout the year.



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Exploring the Basic Human Need to Create

Listen by Brigid Amos Kicks Off AACT NewPlayFest 2026

David A. VanCleave

AACT NewPlayFest 2026 officially kicked off in October, with Theatre Salina's world premiere of *Listen* by Brigid Amos. The 90-minute dramatic comedy exploring the creative impulse performed for sold-out crowds.

For New Jersey-based playwright Amos, the journey to that success began many years ago, with an extremely specific submission call.

"A theatre company needed 15-minute plays for productions in three galleries of a museum that had removed all its art to make way for renovation," Amos explained. "So, I wrote a short little play about a famous artist who brings an unusual painting into a gallery devoid of art, pursued by a sibling who does not want the world to see that painting."



Karen Bonar, Heartland Photography LLC

Allison Cook (Kelly) and Gary Demuth (Dale) in Theatre Salina's world premiere of *Listen* by Brigid Amos

While her submission was not selected, she found it difficult to let go: "I just loved that idea, and I kept working on it. I extended it to a full-length, added two new characters, and kept working on it."

The full version, which will be published and licensed by Dramatic Publishing Company next year, follows Dale Digman, a brilliant but unstable artist who rediscovers the joy of creating through American painter and TV art instructor Bob Ross. After escaping the watchful eye of Carson, his sister-turned-caretaker, Dale takes one of his Ross-inspired pieces to an up-and-coming Brooklyn gallery. It's owned by Kelly Anker, who is about to showcase the work of Jay Turnbull, Dale's former classmate who seems to have mastered the commercial side of art.

Kelly is naturally taken aback by the prominent departure from Dale's previous signature style, but is adamant that the world needs to see his new work and that she be the one to show it. Dale's sister, on the other hand, will stop at nothing to ensure nobody else sees or

hears of his latest work. Is Kelly out to make a quick buck, even at the cost of Dale's reputation? Or is it her admiration of his work that drives her to showcase his new voice? Is Carson trying to protect her brother's reputation, as she has throughout his struggles with mental illness? Or is she primarily concerned about the value of her "nest egg"—the collection of Dale's work sitting in her storage?

"It was hard work," Amos said of sticking with the idea for so many years. "But I kept working on it—and, more importantly, kept believing in it."

"It felt like real life—not acting!"
—Salina Audience Member

Amos wasn't the only one who believed in *Listen*, which was one of over 450 scripts submitted to NewPlayFest in 2024. After advancing through three tiers of review, it was one of 14 finalists sent to Theatre Salina and the other five AACT NewPlayFest producing theatres.

Theatre Salina staff and committee members identified a handful of scripts that paired well with the organization's mission, audiences, goals, and artistic strengths; *Listen* was at the top of the list. Executive Director Michael Spicer referred to it as a "gentle comedy" that explores important themes. "When I think about other shows that deal with art, like *Art* by Yasmina Reza, which is so dense in its ideas, and John Logan's *Red*, which is so dense in its physicality... *Listen* kind of lies between the two, but still deals with the same ideas we all talk about: What is art? What does it mean to create? Why is it valuable to us?" he explained. "It really resonated with me and all of us here at Theatre Salina."

One member of the theatre's programming committee, Gary Demuth, was so impressed with Amos' script that he auditioned for and secured the crucial role of Dale Digman.

"When I first read it a year or so ago, I loved how well written it was and its unique premise... how tender it is," he said. "I didn't even think then that I would be *in* it. But when the opportunity came, I just had to try."

Theatre Salina's acclaimed production connected with audiences on both a personal and larger level. One patron called it "a very heartfelt depiction of a passionate artist's mind and how others interact with them," while another noted how it "captivated from beginning to end." Amos' authentic dialogue and Mark Anderson's keen direction prompted one patron to praise how she felt "like I was involved in the play—like it was real life, not acting."

"Creativity is a part of all human beings," Amos said of audiences connecting in such a profound way. "It's necessary, I think, for everyone. I mean, regardless of whether you consider yourself an artist, everyone has an innate need to create. And no one has the right to

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"*Swing State* is perhaps the first of the great American post-COVID plays, the first work I've seen not just to wrestle with what happened during the pandemic but also to explore, and call out, the fundamental changes it has wrought on our collective psyche."

—Chris Jones, *Chicago Tribune*

SWING STATE

BY REBECCA GILMAN

Author of Spinning Into Butter, Luna Gale and Twilight Bowl.



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Listen *continued from page 12*

tell you that you're not creative or that you shouldn't make art. You should."

"Whatever your creative expression is," she added. "It doesn't even have to be art. It could be cooking. It could be designing. It could be writing. Anything! If it brings you joy, do it."

About Playwright Brigid Amos



Brigid Amos is a New Jersey-based writer whose plays have been produced, read, or podcast in 10 states and the UK. Winner of the 2022 Goshen Peace Play Contest and a 2024 Tiger's Heart Players Literary Competition award, she has also been a finalist for several national playwriting honors and is a member of The Theater Project's Playwrights Workshop and the Dramatists Guild. You can learn more about her work at brigidamos.com

About AACT NewPlayFest's Partners

AACT NewPlayFest is made possible in part by a grant from the Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation. The Foundation was created by the children of Frank Ayre Lee as a tribute to their father, and a legacy for the creative endeavors of his cousin and friend, Jack. The family is pleased to honor both men through AACT NewPlayFest and by presenting and promoting new theatre works. For more information, visit aact.org/newplayfest

Dramatic Publishing Company publishes AACT NewPlayFest's winning plays in anthologies and also licenses production rights for the winning plays. Visit aact.org/anthologies for direct links to Dramatic Publishing Company's NewPlayFest publications, plus links to information about discounts and special offers for AACT members.

Upcoming AACT NewPlayFest Productions

- *The Thomas Hardy Project* by Becca Blackmore, presented by Westchester Collaborative Theater (Ossining, New York), June 19-28, 2026
- *Bloody Murder at the Black Dog Tavern* by Christopher Hencke, presented by Kenai Performers (Soldotna, Alaska), July 30-August 9, 2026
- *They Must Be Women Now* by Nedra Pezold Roberts, presented by Vortex Theatre (Albuquerque, New Mexico), August 14-30, 2026
- *Unabashedly* by Mike Teverbaugh, presented by Waterville Opera House (Waterville, Maine), August 28-September 6, 2026
- *Stag Light* by Emily Turner, presented by Players de Noc, Inc. (Escanaba, Michigan), Fall 2026



David A. VanCleave is the Education Director and NewPlayFest Dramaturg at AACT. As a freelance director and dramaturg, David frequently collaborates with Des Moines Playhouse in Des Moines, Iowa, and Market House Theatre in Paducah, Kentucky, among others. He earned his BFA in Theatre Arts/Directing from The Theatre School at DePaul University.

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AI in the Arts

Adopting Tools with Intention

Quiana Clark-Roland

Like many industries, theatres are experiencing the rapid implementation and integration of AI technologies, both onstage and in administrative offices. Over the past year, AACT has received numerous requests about how to utilize AI for various business functions, such as grant writing, marketing, and ticketing.

For this article, we will focus solely on the operational and administrative applications of AI tools to outline best business practices and policies. Whether you are wanting to use an AI platform to perform a task, or are using a system that has integrated with AI, we hope you will consider establishing policies on usage and protections, if you haven't already.

If you are among those who have expressed no interest in using AI, or concern over its use, your caution and concerns are valid, as well.

Although there are still many questions to be answered, we must acknowledge that many of our existing technologies—such as ticketing software, CRM platforms, webpages and email—are already integrating with AI. Taking that all into consideration, it is important to address how theatres can put best practices into areas that better help protect the theatre, the artists, and its patrons.

Types of AI Tools for Nonprofits

- **Generative AI** creates new text, images, or other content from user prompts.
Nonprofit Use: Writing grant drafts, creating social media posts, and generating reports.
- **Large Language Models (LLMs)** are a type of Generative AI that specialize in understanding and generating text.
Nonprofit Use: Powering chatbots for FAQs or summarizing long documents.
- **Predictive AI** analyzes data to find patterns and forecast future events.
Nonprofit Use: Identifying potential donors and predicting fundraising trends.

If you're looking at using a dedicated AI platform, there may be an option for a free account or a paid subscription. If possible, it is advised that you invest in a paid subscription if it will be handling important trending data about your organization's operations. Also, be aware of the provider's data usage and privacy policies. For example, will your data be used to train its own AI, and if so, how?

The Foundation Group's online article, "4 Tips for Leveraging AI Responsibly at Your Nonprofit," advises that nonprofits do the following if they will be utilizing AI.

1. Develop an AI Usage Policy

Your AI usage policy must align with your existing technology guidelines, especially regarding privacy and compliance. Review all related policies to create a unified framework. A clear AI policy should define acceptable uses, like drafting content or analyzing data while setting critical boundaries. This includes requiring approvals, specifying allowed platforms, safeguarding sensitive data, and en-

continued on page 16 >



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AI in the Arts *continued from page 15*

suring transparent, ethical practices, such as donor or patron opt-outs.

2. Update Your Existing Technology Guidelines

This involves revising the theatre's current technology and communications policies to incorporate AI. Guidelines would be updated to specify that tools like virtual meeting software, design programs, or CRM platforms may now have integrated AI features. It would set rules for their use, such as how customer data from the ticketing system can or cannot be used to train AI models, and ensure that cybersecurity measures address new AI-related risks, as well. This keeps the theatre's operational framework current and secure.

3. Use Trustworthy AI Tools Designed for the Job

The theatre would carefully select AI tools that are reputable, transparent about their data use, and fit-for-purpose. Examples might include using a well-established AI platform for subtitling and translating live performances for accessibility, or employing a robust analytics tool to predict audience trends for programming decisions. The key is matching the tool to a specific need—not using AI for its own sake—and verifying that the tool's outputs are reliable and fair, and enhance the theatre's mission without introducing bias or error.

4. Retain the Human Touch in Your Nonprofit's Work

This principle ensures that AI serves as a tool to augment, not replace, the essential human elements of theatre. While AI might help draft donor thank-you emails, a personal note from a staff member or artist would be added. AI-assisted design concepts would be interpreted and built by human designers and craftspeople. Most importantly, the artistic heart—the director's vision, the playwright's voice, the actor's live, empathetic connection with an audience—remains irreplaceably human. AI can handle administrative tasks or expand creative possibilities, but the core artistic and community relationships are nurtured by people.

While AI is becoming a tool used in both personal and professional contexts, AACT is working to formulate a better understanding of how it could impact community theatre and the daily lives of those we serve, now and in the future. This includes its potential long-term environmental, artistic, and economic effects. Will AI become like a Walmart in a small town, altering the local landscape indelibly? Or will it prove more revolutionary, advancing society in positive ways?

As you move forward in the direction that feels ethical and right for you, we encourage you to prioritize safety and best-practices policies in your theatre and work. For theatres, this means first and foremost protecting the artists' work, keeping human connection at the core of your operations and productions, and protecting your donors and patrons' privacy. Taken together, these practices help ensure that AI remains a support tool, and not a decision-maker.

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Quiana Clark-Roland is the Executive Director of the American Association of Community Theatres (AACT). Before joining AACT, she served as the Executive Assistant and Program Manager for the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC), where she played a key role in planning and coordinating one of the largest theatre festivals in the country. She began her career in graduate school as the Administrative Assistant for the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, a membership and service organization based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, dedicated to strengthening and amplifying the voices of its more than 400 member organizations.

Quiana holds an M.S. in Arts Administration from Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and a B.A. in Arts Administration with a minor in Theatre from the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky. She is a mother of two and a passionate advocate for the arts.



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Miki Abraham on Trusting the Role Meant for You

Michael Cochran

Currently appearing on the national tour of the musical, *Shucked*, playing the part of Lulu, McKynleigh “Miki” Abraham is a non-binary actor and singer whose early roots in community theatre began at the age of seven, performing at Market House Theatre in Paducah, Kentucky.

Past theatre credits include national tours of *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* and *Once on This Island*, as well as appearances on Oxygen’s *The Glee Project*, competing for a spot on Fox’s hit television series, *Glee*.

Michael Cochran directed Abraham in more than a dozen productions at Market House Theatre in Paducah, and recently caught up with the busy actor for a conversation between performances on their 30-plus-city tour of *Shucked*.

MC: What tips would you give to youth or adults who are auditioning today—whether for school productions, community theatre, or professional work?

MA: There is no such thing as competition. Everyone is uniquely themselves, so if you are auditioning, learning and doing the work, something will happen for you that is meant to happen. It is impossible for someone to take a role that is meant for you.



Finding Their Way to *Shucked*

Abraham detailed their journey to *Shucked* in an interview in *David Magazine* as follows:

“I got my first audition for this show that didn’t have a name. I sang the opening number, ‘Corn.’ I ended up booking another show that took me out of the running. I remember being like, ‘If this is supposed to happen for me, it’ll happen for me.’ I declined the final callback, went and did a show in Florida. Six months later, I got another audition for a show called *Shucked*, and [when] I looked at it, realized it was the untitled show I originally auditioned for in June of 2022. I ended up going through the callback process and booking an off-stage swing role, where I covered four ensemble characters and understudied Lulu. At the time, Lilli Cooper was originally playing Lulu, and then she left, and Alex Newell joined. We did the pre-Broadway run in Salt Lake City, Utah, then transferred to Broadway. We opened April 4, and without any rehearsal at all, I debuted Lulu on April 6. So, it’s just been this wild thing of making sense that I should be in this show. *Shucked* has been with me for a long time. We found each other.”

In a workshop with youth at Market House Theatre, while Abraham was performing on Broadway, they spoke about frequently auditioning alongside close friends for the same roles—and how learning to give their best, regardless of casting outcomes, built confidence and resilience both in theatre and in life. You have very little control over how a show is cast, but what you do have is the ability to give it your best effort, because being proud of that effort means so much for your growth as an artist.

continued on page 20 >

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From Paducah to *Shucked* continued from page 18

Self-Talk, Confidence, and Coaching

Abraham's motto is "The most important story you will ever tell is the one you tell yourself about yourself." They credit that belief to the power of positive self-talk.

"You can't tell yourself you can't do something and then expect to go out into the world and have others validate you," Abraham said. "It just doesn't work that way."

Beyond the stage, Abraham is the owner of Castle In The Sky Self-Esteem and Career Coaching, where joy and empowerment is shared through transparency and tough love.

Looking Ahead

MC: What advice would you give to someone considering a career in the arts?

MA: Trust yourself and get really good at knowing what you need. There is no one in the world—especially in the arts—who will ever know you better than you know yourself. Always be able to fall back on yourself.

MC: You've been on Broadway and toured nationally—dreams for many young performers. What goals are you looking toward next?

MA: I've been so blessed to achieve a dream I had from a very young age. I would love to originate a role on Broadway and eventually move into teaching, possibly at the collegiate level.

Why Community Theatre Matters

MC: Is there anything else you'd like to say about community theatre?

MA: Community theatre is so special and so important. I think people sometimes believe the only way to be a performer is to do it professionally, or make it your entire life. But having a space to create and be around people who love the same art that you do is incredibly meaningful—and deeply needed.

Abraham is currently touring more than 30 cities with the national tour of Shucked, receiving rave reviews for their performances.

Bio

Miki Abraham (they/them) is a Broadway actor and self-esteem coach.

Broadway: *Shucked* (Original Broadway Cast)

Off-Broadway: *A Sign of the Times* (New World Stages)

National Tours: *Shucked*, *Once on This Island*, *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*

Instagram: @mikiabraham_



Michael Cochran has worked in all aspects of theatre winning awards in acting, directing, and designing during his career. He has worked professionally in theatre, television and film in Chicago and Kansas City. He spent over 40 years at the Market House Theatre in Paducah KY and recently retired as Executive and Artistic Director in 2025 and continues as a freelance director and consultant.



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BY MICHAEL GRIFFO

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New Voices and New Stories

How Theatres Are Attracting New Audiences

Mary Doveton

Most of us obsess over choosing our seasons. Will audiences come to this? Will actors audition for that? Can we get the rights? Can we make budget?

However, across the country some theatre companies are stepping out with ideas to attract new audiences, tell new stories, and reflect the communities with whom they engage. From Casper, Wyoming, Topeka, Kansas, and Traverse City, Michigan, companies are experimenting with new theatre.

4th Wall Down!

Casper, Wyoming, is a town of 55,000 people and five theatre companies! Donna Fisher, who directs the Casper Theater Company, is no stranger to experimenting with innovative shows. This is the group that turned their lobby into a “diner” in the dead of a Wyoming winter and staged original shows using a soap opera format. They sold “series” tickets with six installments playing every other Sunday afternoon with cliff hanger “endings.” Breaks during the shows featured food and commercials from local businesses. During the week they wrote their next installment.

In their latest experiment, the company took a play called *The Code for Christmas*, by Gail Alexander, and began working on a readers theatre version of the script. This soon evolved, and instead the group prepared to share it with the audience in its entirety. According to Donna, they called the project “4th Wall Down!”, referencing the imaginary wall between audience and stage.

A stage manager and a “playwright” joined the actors on stage, and audience members got to see everything happening, both on-stage in the story and in what is usually considered backstage, behind the scenes. Audiences watched the stage manager calling light and sound cues. They saw sets and props being moved and scene changes taking place in full light. The “playwright” made changes to the script as actors performed, and the actors made the changes in the scripts they carried. Donna says the sold-out shows gave people a new experience, as well as an appreciation for the many elements that go into a theatrical production.

Shades of Theatre

In Topeka, Kansas, Jim Ramos describes a journey and a passion. A person of color who has spent five decades in theatre, he was frequently asked to be part of panels discussing diversity in theatre. Noting that such discussions rarely went anywhere, he channeled his frustrations into the formation of a new theatre.



Jim Ramos

The company, Shades of Theatre, was born in 2024 after much coffee house discussion with people whom Jim trusted, and representatives of di-



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continued on page 22 >

New Voices and New Stories *continued from page 21*



Cast of *Raisin in the Sun* at *Shades of Theatre*

“theatre is a powerful force for cultural understanding and social change, where diverse voices are celebrated on stage and off, and where theatre serves as a platform for empathy, education, and empowerment for all communities.” The company’s inaugural season included *Fade* by Tanya Saracho, *Stop Kiss* by Diana Son, and *Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, and Jim estimates that one-half to two-thirds of the people participating with them are new. Some have had small parts at other theatres, but here they take on all the roles, as well as stage managing, crewing, acting as dramaturgs, and directing the marketing. Visual artists from the communities often work with the set design. The group actively reaches out to diverse communities before doing each production.

Alongside these fully realized stage plays, *Shades of Theatre* has also launched a series called *This Is My Story*. Beginning as a free series in a coffee house, each evening features a different individual who shares a compelling story of his or her own life. Past stories have featured immigration experiences from Cuba and Ukraine, a story of addiction, an individual “coming out of the hood,” and most recently, a story of being a gay actor/dancer in New York in the 1960s.

When asked about a moment that makes him particularly proud, Jim defers to the planning and hard work of many people, saying, “It is truly humbling, satisfying, amazing... all the feels. It’s hard to single out just one moment. Every night that ‘places’ was called was magical.”

However, his accomplishment might best be summed up by Topeka poet, actress, and director Annette Billings, when she grabbed his hand said, “Thank you for seeing me.”

Mashup Rock & Roll

In Michigan, *Mashup Rock & Roll* was born in 2013 when two people wanted to do a more modern take on musical theatre with a funky performance of *How Grinchy Met the Who*. Lesley Tye, the director and a founding member says, “All of our cast had such a blast being able to create something that had never been done before, and so we moved forward, sort of as a troupe. The idea was that [productions] were always “Mashups,” taking source material and music and mixing it together in a new way.”

verse communities. The group’s mission aspires to “ignite a transformative theatrical experience that celebrates diverse cultures, empowers the voices of underserved communities, and fosters deeper understanding, empathy, and appreciation of the human experience.”

Their vision is a world where

Many members of the group are part of the queer community, and as productions increased, the troupe realized that all of the stories they wrote/remixed were at their heart about tolerance and acceptance. Their shows have included everything from *A Midsummer’s Night’s California Dream*, with music by the Beach Boys and the Mamas and the Papas, to *Madonnativity*, *The Sound of mUZIC*, *Look Who’s Talking Heads*, and *Quack to the Future*. During the pandemic they did parking lot theatre with *Scooby Doo Wop* for families, complete with interactive clues and dancing in front of the cars.

No matter what show the group is working on, they are extremely collaborative in their creative process. While Lesley writes the scripts, actors often revise and add lines. They try to support other writers and directors, and in their intimate venue, always include some kind of popular audience participation.

With a new, small venue to call their own, the group now moves into the future with a vision: “To bring a unique and irreplaceable rock & roll theatre experience to Northern Michigan, while challenging ourselves and our audiences to move outside our own



Mashup Rock & Roll’s Madonnativity

perspectives. We produce new works that remix popular culture not just to entertain, but to celebrate and question the society we live in, with stories that promote inclusion and tolerance.”

In a climate where so many of us are reaching for expensive production aids and big-budget shows, these groups are especially notable for relying primarily on the creativity, imagination, hard work, and collaboration of their members.



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



AACT Community Theatre Board of Directors Survey

Michael Cochran, with an Introduction by Dorinda Toner

Introduction

Dorinda Toner

It has been a great joy engaging in conversation about this board survey with my colleague and collaborator, Michael Cochran. As he explains, this survey highlights the effectiveness of boards in financial management and shares some encouraging numbers about years of service and commitment. But it also points out areas for improvement, including training and onboarding, with only 35% of board members reporting they received any form of orientation.

Another area of concern revealed by the survey is the need for a better understanding of the role and responsibilities of board members in nonprofit organizations, including the need for board members to provide specific expertise and contribute financially. This is one of the challenges many small theatres face in balancing board responsibilities with day-to-day operations. Boards often get involved in hands-on tasks, rather than focusing on strategic roles—underscoring the importance of distinguishing between governance boards and working boards, or exploring hybrid options. Michael encourages us to view board members as consultants who help stabilize operations and provide strategic governance support.

One of the biggest takeaways from the survey is the importance of board service itself and the need for effective board training. AACT is a great partner in this, offering online resources, roundtables and master classes, the Community Theatre Management Conference (CTMC), the National Directors Conference (NDC), and classes and training offered at our national and international festivals. For an even deeper dive, check out the resources shared at the end of this article, including Twink Lynch's classic book, Boards in the Spotlight (newly updated).

The Survey

Michael Cochran

There were 139 responses to our survey on boards. Respondents identified a range of budgets, with 35% of theatres reporting budgets of under \$100,000, and 39% with budgets between \$100,000-\$250,000. The numbers drop off quickly when we pass the \$500,000 budget level.

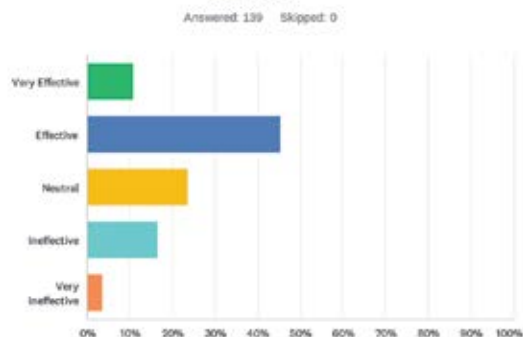
Focusing on experience and age, 40% of respondents have been involved in theatre boards for more than 20 years, while 23% have been involved for 10-20 years. On the flip side, 21% have been involved 1-5 years and only 10% have been involved 5-10 years. This suggests a lot of experience with older participants, but a significant gap in people involved in the 5-to-10-year range, moving forward. When it comes to the average age of board members, the largest group is age 45-54, followed by 26% who are ages 55-64. The lowest age range is the 25-to-34-year-old group, with 2%.

When we add experience and age together, we see a gap in getting people with 5-10 years of experience, as well as those in the under-35 age group, who will be critical as boomers retire. The largest group of respondents estimated that 51% of their current board members have served 3-6 years. The second largest group (21% of respondents) reported service of 7-10 years, while 17% reported terms of less than three years.

Board sizes saw 45% with 6-10 members, and 40% with 11-15

members. Only 7% had more than 15 members, and about 2% had 21 or more board members.

Q3 How would you rate the overall effectiveness of your board of directors?



Regarding efficiency, 44% of respondents rated their board as effective, and an additional 11% rated their board as very effective. However, 23% were neutral in rating their board's effectiveness, and 20% rated their boards as ineffective or very ineffective.

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by Maj O'Neil-Ruter

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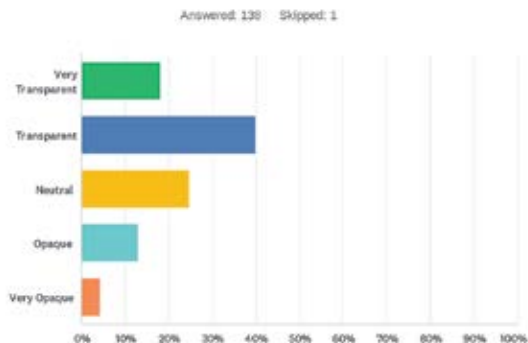
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Board of Directors Survey continued from page 23

While nearly 40% feel their board’s communications with their community are effective, a full 59% rated their communication efforts as neutral, poor, or very poor. When it comes to decision making, 58% rated their boards as transparent or very transparent, while 42% rated their process as neutral, opaque, or very opaque.

Q5 How transparent do you feel the board is in its decision-making processes?



When an organization seeks new board members, consultants often advise using a matrix to identify the skills you will need (legal, financial, HR, building contractor, etc.) for the next year, the year after that, and so on, depending on your strategic needs and plans. However, the largest number of our respondents reported their board does not use a matrix in this way. Those boards that do say they prioritize financial management (41%) and fundraising (39.5%) as the most important skills. Marketing and community engagement average about 32% of important skills identified. The lowest-ranked skills reported in the survey were event planning and human resources.

Boards seem to be doing a good job with financial management as only 27.8% felt they needed more financial management expertise. The expertise gap not being successfully addressed was fundraising ability (74%) followed by volunteer management. While fundraising and volunteer management were ranked as important as financial management skills in the matrix, this deficiency seems to say that theatres aren’t finding people with those skills for boards. One of the solutions to this might be to consider bringing in fundraising and human resource consultants to train board members on developing skills, goals, and best practices in those areas—in other words help develop the talent you need.

When asked if their board members are required to make an individual financial contribution, 60% of respondents said no. Only 29% said yes. There may be a direct connection here to why so many boards report that they need help most with fundraising. (Almost all board consultants recommend that board members make a financial contribution, which displays their own commitment when trying to inspire and motivate others to give, as well.)

Of those theatres that do require board giving, 20.7% reported gifts averaging under \$100, while 12% reported between \$100–\$250. Just 4% of theatre board members gave \$500–\$1,000. Instead of a specific dollar amount, some theatres referenced a policy that asks for an amount that is significant to each individual board member, and many ask that board members put the theatre in the top three of their annual giving while serving on the board.

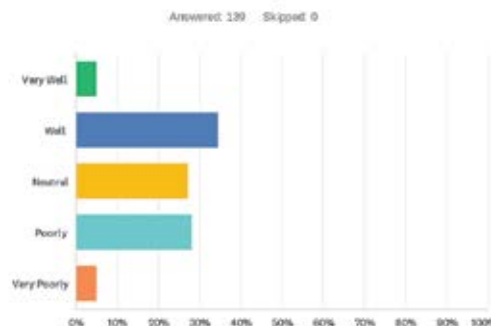
When it comes to time commitments, 82% of boards meet monthly. Regarding board terms, 37% of respondents reported terms of two years and 39% reported board terms of three years.

The largest group of respondents (45%) said their boards have no term limits, while 40% reported that they do. (A few respondents reported not knowing if their board had term limits or not.)

With respect to nominating board candidates, 40% of our responding theatres use a nomination committee, while 25% have individual board members nominate new members. It’s interesting to note that 11% of responding theatres said they have no formal nominating process. The good news is that 65% of respondents reported they were likely or very likely to recommend others joining their boards. Fully 80% of our responding theatres have elections to choose board members.

On the matter of training and providing the tools for board members to be effective, 65% of our respondents reported there are no training or orientation sessions for new board members. However, most board development consultants regard sessions like these as key in ensuring effective board service. Training outlines expectations in giving and time commitments, and also makes clear how the board helps achieve the mission of the organization.

Q4 How well do you think your board communicates its decisions to the community?



Resources

How can AACT help boards be more effective? One of the best tools it offers was developed by Twink Lynch, Ph.D.—*Boards in the Spotlight*. In this recently updated book, Lynch deals with virtually every issue reported in our survey. She identifies the different stages of board development, based on budget size. She explains “auditioning” potential board members, and how to provide clear expectations and training—including having them sign board “contracts,” that state that they understand what is expected before they agree to serve. To order the book, visit aact.org/boards-spotlight.

In his book, *Scene Change 2: The Five REAL Responsibilities of Nonprofit Arts Boards* (Changemakers Books), theatre veteran Alan Harrison tells organizations to think of their board members as being the best consultants available in the community. If you use a rough figure of \$100 an hour for a good consultant, your theatre will “spend” the equivalent thousands of dollars of in-kind expenses each year on your board of directors. For that time and expense, you need to get the most bang for your buck for every hour of board service in order to make your organization the absolute best it can be.

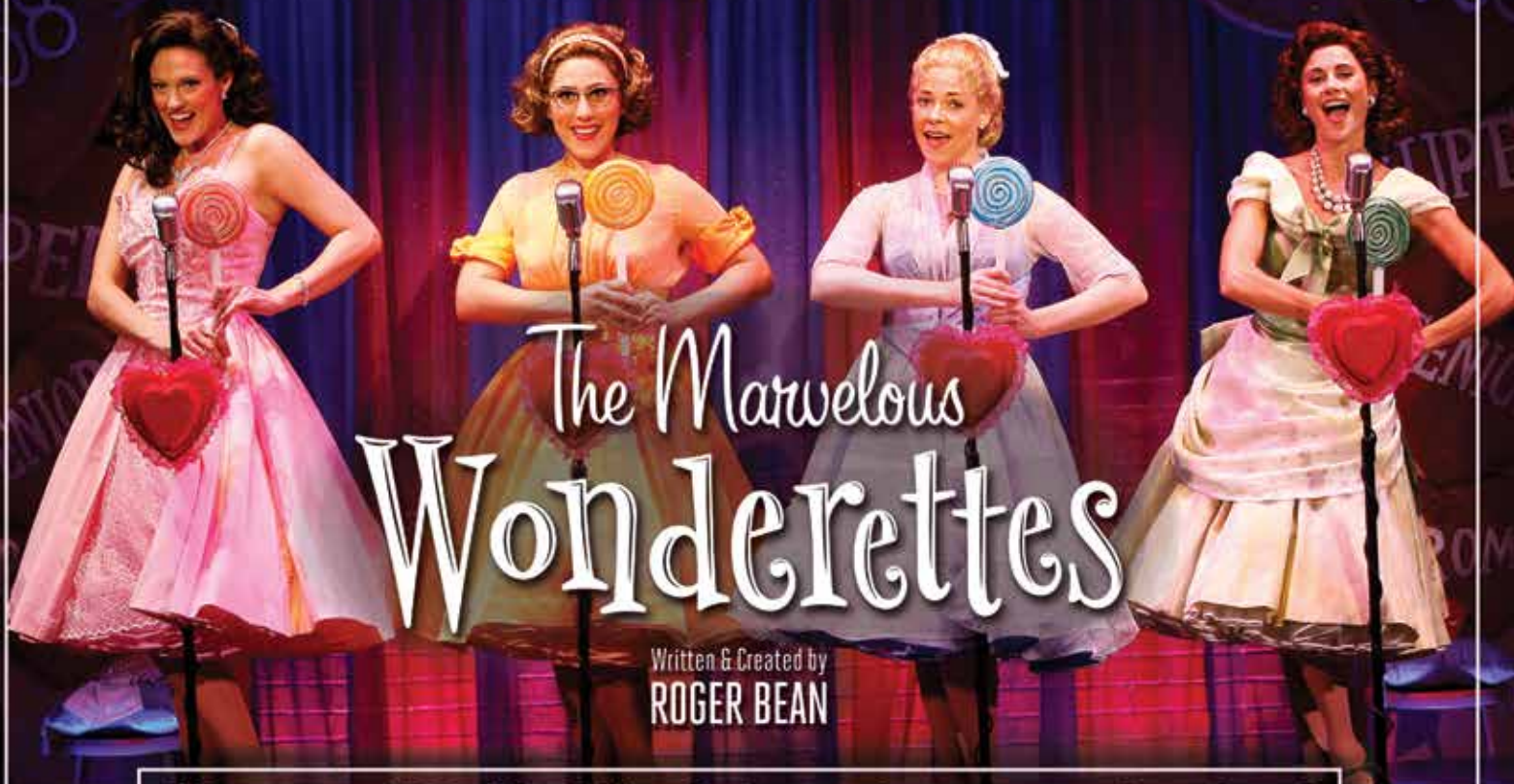
For the entire survey results, see aact.org/board-survey

References

- Twink Lynch: *AACT Boards in the Spotlight*
- Alan Harrison: *The Five Responsibilities of a Nonprofit Arts Board*
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Before the Curtain Rises

The Invisible Art of Making Community Theatre

Maxwell Schaeffer

Editor's Note: Most of us know full well how much time and effort is required to get a production ready to open. In fact, we know it so well that we sometimes take it for granted—it's simply what needs to be done. But, as Maxwell Schaeffer reminds us in this article, there comes a moment near the end of rehearsals that is truly transformative. It's the moment when all the pieces click into place, and the magic of theatre truly begins.

Martha Graham, the revolutionary American dancer and choreographer, once said, "Theatre is a verb before it is a noun, an act before it is a place." That phrase has stuck with me ever since I first heard it. I think about it every time I step into a rehearsal hall, crack open a script, or greet a new cast on the first day of a production. Theatre, at its core, isn't just something you watch. It's something you *do*. It is motion. It is energy. It is action.

And the act of making theatre begins long before the first actor sets foot on stage.

It all starts quietly, months in advance. A play or musical is selected as part of an upcoming season. That decision might seem simple from the outside, but it's rooted in months, sometimes years,

of conversation, licensing negotiations, artistic vision, and a deep understanding of what a community wants and needs to see on-stage. The selection of a show is the first domino, and once it falls, momentum begins to build.

Next comes the blueprinting. Directors, producers, choreographers, designers, and musicians begin sketching out what this story could look and sound like. Questions get asked: What does this show feel like? How will the set shift? What time period are we anchoring in? What's the emotional arc for each character? How can we do justice to this work within the confines of our space, time, and budget?

"Those moments remind you why we do this."

Once auditions are posted, the train really starts to move. Talent shows up—nervous, hopeful, hungry, and a cast is chosen. Rehearsals begin. People who were strangers just days ago start becoming a family. Blocking is set. Songs are learned. Dances are drilled. Lines are stumbled through, then memorized. Mistakes are made. Laughter is shared. Bonds are built. Slowly but surely, the blurry outline of a production becomes clearer.

In the case of *Waitress*, at the Des Moines Playhouse (which ran in July, 2025), I found myself reflecting more than usual on the behind-the-scenes momentum that fuels community theatre. I played the role of Joe, the grumpy-yet-wise pie diner owner in this musical by Sara Bareilles, based on the 2007 film by the same name. This marked the 28th Playhouse production I'd been involved in since 1990, whether as an actor, director, backstage volunteer, or sound designer, and you'd think by now I'd be used to the process. But I'm not. It still surprises me. And perhaps nowhere is the magic (and madness) more apparent than during one crucial stop along the journey: *cue-to-cue*.

Cue-to-Cue: The Crucial Halt

Cue-to-cue, often shortened to "Q2Q," is that magical (and mildly terrifying) moment in the production process when everything comes to a halt. The forward motion we've been riding for weeks—rehearsals, music, blocking, dancing—suddenly freezes. And for good reason.

This is the day we painstakingly thread all the invisible strings together. Light cues. Sound effects. Microphone adjustments. Scene transitions. Set changes. Prop handoffs. It's an all-hands-on-deck and very long day when the director, stage manager, designers, crew, and cast must work together to ensure every technical element of the script is exactly where it needs to be, down to the second.

For *Waitress*, that moment came on Saturday, July 5th.

Picture it: the entire cast and crew assembled as we crawled

page-by-page through the 112-page script, stopping constantly. “Lights up!” Pause. “Music cue 14.” Pause. “Counter rotates here.” Pause. A pie is placed. A stool is reset. A character walks onstage not to deliver a line, but to check their blocking under a new lighting wash. Over the course of a single day, we applied more than a thousand individual light cues, prop movements, sound effects, and scenic shifts. We haven’t even added costumes, yet! (That came a couple days later with the first “dress” rehearsal.)

To the outside observer, it might feel tedious—disjointed, even. But it’s absolutely essential. Cue-to-cue is where the show’s rhythm is written into its bones. It’s where you find out just how complicated your show has become. It’s also when the cast realizes, “Whoa—this is the real deal.”

And here’s the thing: while Broadway shows have weeks or even months of previews and out-of-town tryouts to work through these kinks, community theatre productions don’t have that luxury. Our production had seven days to get back to speed. We didn’t have bottomless budgets or endless rehearsal schedules. What we *did* have was a passionate team of staff, volunteers, designers, and performers who gave their nights and weekends to make something beautiful. Somehow, impossibly, it comes together. Every time.

I’ve seen it happen again and again. In the chaos of cue-to-cue, you often get glimpses of the final product peeking through the fog. You see the lights change on an actor’s face during a crucial moment, and you feel a shiver down your spine. You hear the harmonies of a ballad echo in the house for the first time, and suddenly the story feels real. Those moments remind you *why* we do this.

The Community Engine

Community theatre, perhaps more than any other kind, is a labor of love. It’s where servers become leading ladies. Where schoolteachers become ensemble actors. Where accountants moonlight as set painters. Where young people get their first taste of the stage, and where veterans like me keep coming back because, well, we just can’t help ourselves. We believe in the power of story. We believe in that sacred space between the curtain and the footlights.


“Theatre may appear to be a finished product. But it is, first and always, an act.”

And as cue-to-cue fades into final dress rehearsals and eventually opening night, something incredible happens. The friction of stops and starts gives way to fluid motion. We begin to dance, not just literally, but as a full company, in sync. Each tech cue, each blackout, each set shift becomes second nature. The train is moving again. Faster now. Steadier. Until finally, the audience arrives, and the lights go down.

That’s when the magic truly happens.

And all those verbs, the acts of reading, selecting, designing, rehearsing, painting, rigging, adjusting, cueing, finally transform

continued on page 28 >



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Before the Curtain Rises *continued from page 27*

into a noun: *Theatre*. A place where people gather to laugh, cry, think, and feel. A place where, for two hours, the world outside disappears, and we are all transported somewhere new.

So when you find yourself at the theatre to see a show, know that what you're witnessing is more than just a performance. It's the result of hundreds of hours of movement. Action.

Theatre may appear to be a finished product. But it is, first and always, an act.



Maxwell Schaeffer, media figure & Iowa Rock 'n' Roll Hall-of-Famer, hosts the Iowa CoffeeCast. He's also a voice artist, singer-songwriter, award-winning actor/director, and proud champion of Iowa culture.



World Theatre Day March 27

Stephen Peithman

Theatre organizations and theatre lovers around the globe will once again be celebrating World Theatre Day on March 27.

Sponsored by the International Theatre Institute (ITI), World Theatre Day is designed to underscore the value and importance of theatre as an art form, its positive impact on individuals and communities, and its potential for economic growth. As part of that

mission, each year a figure of world stature shares their reflections in a widely-circulated World Theatre Day Message.

While national and international theatre events are organized to mark the occasion, many activities also are local. For more on these celebrations, this year's print and video Message, and how you can participate in celebrating World Theatre Day, visit world-theatre-day.org.



World Theatre Day

International Theatre Institute ITI - World Organization for the Performing Arts



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Ruyle expertly tackles and dissects race relations in the 50s via a rustic tale filled with tension, danger, innocence, and humanity. Exceptional storytelling and exquisitely devised characters. Fantastic!



Look for these engaging plays
from Kim E. Royle



A Crooked French Affair, 6F/4M
From Next Stage Press
Wickedly funny! A love letter to theatre and people who make it.



Sliding into Seniorhood, 3F/3M
From Next Stage Press
A charming romantic comedy that springs a stunning conclusion.



Five Frickin Winters, 2F/2M,
Mature Audiences
From Next Stage Press
A witty, complex play about the prickly pitfalls of romance & infidelity.

Friends We'll Miss: Jon Douglas Rake

A Lifetime of Service to Community Theatre

Quiana Clark-Roland

With heavy hearts, we reflect on the legacy of Jon Douglas Rake, who passed away in December. A cornerstone of our board and a tireless champion for community theatre, his absence is felt deeply, but his impact endures in every stage and every community he inspired.

Jon served as an AACT regional representative and was a passionate, steadfast supporter of community theatre at every level. His dedication to AACT, Region IX, the Washington State Community Theatre Association, and the broader theatre community was matched by his talents, passion, and unwavering commitment to the art form.

A pivotal figure in the Tacoma, Washington, arts scene, Jon was the co-founder of Tacoma Musical Playhouse (TMP), along with his life partner, Jeffrey Stvrtecky. Now in its 32nd season, the nonprofit theatre stands as a testament to his legacy of leadership, creativity, and historic preservation. Under his guidance, TMP earned national and international recognition.

Jon's journey in theatre began with a directing degree from University of California San Diego, where he studied under Tony-winning director Alan Schneider. He built a successful career in Los Angeles as a dancer, choreographer, and director. It was there he met his husband and life partner of 42 years, Jeffrey Stvrtecky. Together, they relocated to the Pacific Northwest to establish TMP.

His influence extended far beyond Tacoma, however. He was an AACT member and volunteer, including service on our Board



as Region IX Representative. In 2017, Jon received AACT's David C. Bryant Outstanding Service Award, and in 2025, achieved a personal dream by being inducted as an AACT Fellow, an honor recognizing his significant contributions.

"I had the greatest respect for Jon," said AACT Fellow Donna Fisher of Casper, Wyoming. "He was decisive, intelligent, and so dedicated to AACT and the theatre. I will miss him with the fondest memories for a very long time."

For many, Jon was more than a colleague; he was a mentor and the heart of a theatre family. Chris Serface of Tacoma shared: "Jon opened the theatre world to me... I would not be who I am today or surrounded by the people I'm surrounded by if it weren't for Jon. His presence didn't just change my career. It changed my heart."

In a March 2025 statement, prior to his induction as an AACT Fellow, Jon reflected on his mission: "I have devoted much of my life to community theatre, driven by the joy of witnessing the unique camaraderie and talent it fosters... I am committed to supporting other community theatres, helping them flourish and make a lasting impact."

Jon is survived by his life partner, Jeffrey Stvrtecky. As we read through the countless messages left on his memorial and the personal stories shared about how he touched so many lives, we in the AACT community are grieving alongside Jeffrey, Jon's family, his friends, and the many, many artists across the country who carry a piece of his spirit with them. The mark he left on community theatre is deep and lasting.



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The Story of AACT's Online Resource Group

Quiana Clark-Roland

In 2020, with so many theatres and programs closing or pausing their in-person events due to the pandemic, AACT recognized a critical need for a new platform where members could connect, share resources, offer advice, and provide mutual support. The future was uncertain, but we knew such a space would be vital, since AACT itself was navigating similar challenges, pivoting our own flagship event, AACTFest, to a virtual format.

The solution emerged when AACT leaned into social media, an idea championed by former AACT President Rick Kerby. In early 2020, in partnership with Broadway Media, we launched the public Covid-19 Community Theatre Resource Facebook Group, which has since transitioned to become the Community Theatre Resource Group:

facebook.com/groups/communitytheatresourcegroup

The group's growth quickly surpassed our expectations. Over five years, it has expanded to more than 59,000 members, a testament to the profound need it has fulfilled. While we anticipated participation from AACT's member theatres, we were especially encouraged to see a surge in people joining from a variety of theatre experiences and backgrounds, including parents of children involved in school productions, international artists, and professional actors and theatre practitioners.

To help manage the success, Broadway Media helped dedicate staff hours to help AACT monitor and moderate the group, for which AACT is deeply grateful. We are also grateful to our board

members who have dedicated their time to help with moderation and topic prompts.

Our goal has always been to foster and cultivate genuine conversations and advice about topics relevant to theatre. With that in mind, we implemented a rule for the group that it must not be used to sell or promote individual work or sales. We knew this was essential, as experience has shown that promotional content can overwhelm meaningful discussion.

AACT has learned so much from the group in return, giving us ideas for our educational programming and services. For example, as a result of feedback from the group, we are exploring ways we can help those seeking to hire freelancers.

Member Voices: The Impact in Their Own Words

The Community Theatre Resource Group serves as a testament to the sheer value it provides. It demonstrates the variety and diversity of those who engage in community theatre, and opens the doors for those who are curious. Like a vessel, it takes the shape from what the community pours into it.

Here are just two responses to our question, "What's the most helpful thing you've learned or gained from being part of this group?"

continued on page 32 >

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From Crisis to Connection *continued from page 32*

“It’s been confirmed for me that we are all in the same boat. We face the same challenges. We celebrate the same successes. And we all LOVE theatre!!!” – Lynn Harper Nelson

“I have gained confidence in how I operate as a director and theater admin. Sooooo many people in this group use and suggest similar techniques. For example, I became active in a theater that decides their season during a two hour zoom meeting. Just. One. Meeting. WITHOUT reading the plays. Well, THAT had to change.” – Steve Reazor

More Than a Group: The Heart of the AACT Mission

AACT is proud to host this space for everyone in theatre to connect and learn. The Community Theatre Resource Group is a free resource, reflecting the very heart of our mission. For those ready to engage more deeply, AACT membership transforms shared passion into direct support through comprehensive resources, professional development programs, and a powerful national voice that is dedicated solely to the success of community theatre. To join, visit aact.org/membership-fees.

We hope the connections and insights gained serve as an inspiration to explore the full scope of AACT’s member benefits, and that participants join us in the vital mission to see *theatre thrive for all*.



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Karley Vance and Dwayne Harris

Lou Ursone

The advantages of AACT membership are many—just consider the ways these two members say AACT has given them new perspectives and tools to use in their theatres.

Karley Vance



An unlikely career journey in the hospitality and health care industries led Karley Vance to her current position as Executive Director at Andria Theatre in Alexandria, Minnesota. With little more than six months on the job, Vance found herself in a room full of theatre leaders from across the country, with a combined total of thousands of years in experience. Yet she made her voice heard and enjoyed an incredible experience in the process.

That opportunity came at AACT's recent biennial National Director's Conference in San Antonio, Texas, where Vance jumped right in and made the most of this unique learning experience.

"Our organization has been a member of AACT for a very long time, but no one had taken full advantage of it," she said.

"When I became Executive Director, (after serving less than a year as Box Office Manager) I started taking advantage of AACT's online Roundtable discussions," she explained. "And then I went to [AACT's 2026 Community Theatre Management Conference—CTMC] in Des Moines, Iowa," she said. She and her staff now take advantage of the Roundtables almost monthly.

"Where we're located, we don't have a lot of exposure to other theatres. The closest professional theatre is two hours away, and there's a community theatre about an hour away. So as a staff of four, we turn to AACT to help us change things around and be more efficient at the office," Vance noted.

The AACT Roundtables on marketing trends and board issues were key sessions for her.

continued on page 34 >



Short Plays *by the Dozen*

Among the most produced works by senior theatre groups in the country, these plays by Arthur Keyser are now available from Theatre Odyssey.



www.theatreodyssey.org



AACT Advantage *continued from page 33*

“I knew when I started that we needed to switch up our marketing, which we did, based on what I learned,” she said. “At the board level, our members now have a skills matrix to work from, which has led to a major change in how we function,” added Vance. (The matrix helps to identify what expertise a board has or needs. A full description, along with a template, is included in *Boards in the Spotlight*, AACT’s groundbreaking book, by Twink Lynch, Ph.D. aact.org/boards-spotlight)

Since attending the two recent in-person sessions, Vance has kept in touch with a few other participants on a regular basis. She has followed up on ideas from people like Theatre Laurence Executive Director Jamie Ulmer, who extolled the benefits of giving production team members debit cards to use for show purchases, rather than having to do reimbursements.

“A few of us are friends on Facebook now so we send ideas back and forth there, too,” she said.

A staff of five people produce 10 mainstage productions each year, in addition to many youth and educational productions and an annual “haunted theatre” event. The knowledge and resources

from AACT have helped Vance and her staff keep this 50-plus-year-old theatre moving in the right direction.

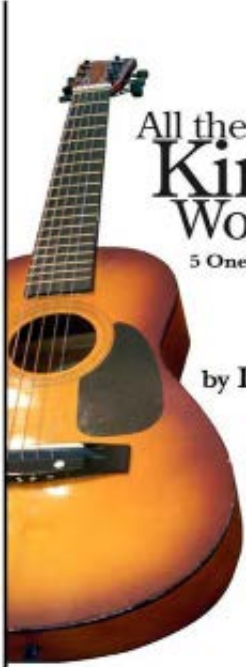
When she meets another theatre leader who is unfamiliar with AACT, Vance tells them about all the benefits.

“If they don’t have a background in theatre, like I didn’t a long time ago, I tell them about the Roundtables, the MTI benefits, the ASCAP and BMI discounts, and so much more that they could take advantage of,” she said.

“Gaining the theatre knowledge that I didn’t have before has been the most valuable part of AACT for me, personally,” Vance said. She has relied on AACT to learn about insurance programs, technical theatre, and more. “And now, with the connections I’ve made, I can reach out to so many people to talk to and find help,” she noted.

Vance’s Facebook header image for her theatre says “Aisle be there for you”—a good indication that she’ll be there to share her knowledge with others, just as AACT members have shared with her.

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through the eyes
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Dwayne Harris



Dwayne Harris heads up the 65-year-old Little Theatre of Manchester, Connecticut, as Executive Director in residence at the elegant, nearly 160-year-old Victorian building known as Cheney Hall.

A Texas native, Harris is no newcomer to the Connecticut theatre scene. “Before I came to Manchester, I worked at two nearby Hartford theatres—the Bushnell Theatre and Hartford Stage,” he said.

“The Little Theatre of Manchester has been a member [of AACT] since long before I came along,” Harris said, “but I hadn’t really been involved, other than constantly checking out the resources on the AACT website.”

Attending AACT’s recent biennial National Director’s Conference was Harris’ first time really getting involved.

“In my very early days on the job, I found a lot of the materials on the website to be incredibly useful in helping me draft new policy handbooks, etc.,” Harris noted. “I felt like I was going in once a week (to AACT’s online resources),” he said. According to Harris, these were all valuable insights geared toward The Little Theatre of Manchester’s five-show season.

“I found exactly what I needed to craft my policies and procedures,” he added.

Harris believes AACT provides a vehicle for a lot more collaboration among community theatres, which often tend to operate independent of others. “If nothing else, to have others to commiserate with who are doing the same things,” he added.

What he has gained through AACT is the ability to bring new ideas and suggestions to his board and others, that “I’m

bringing information to you from leaders across the country—on good authority—that aren’t just my ideas.” He added, “I think that dramatically increases the value of what I’m saying.”

“In the theatre industry, every once in a while, there’ll be a survey with data you can share. But in the community theatre circle, AACT provides access to our direct peers who are doing and operating in the same way that we are,” Harris said. “That adds a tremendous amount of value to me personally and my ability to get things done,” he added.

After attending his first National Director’s Conference, Harris believes there is a lot more information, collaboration, and help available to him by “building the relationships with people that were there and who have lived in the same situation before that I have.”

To any community theatre professional who’s not connected with AACT, Harris said he would tell them about the resources—especially the webinars and discounts—since the cost of membership is very reasonable and it provides “a base level resource everyone should have in their back pocket. There’s no reason to not be a member.”



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.



Keep Community Theatre Alive - Forever

For nearly four decades, the **AACT Endowment Fund** has been a steadfast pillar for community theatre. What began in 1986 to help troupes travel to festivals has grown into a vital force, providing nearly **\$340,000** in festival travel grants and core mission initiatives. Now, we invite you to write its next chapter by joining the **AACT Legacy Society**.



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NEWS FROM THE NORTHEAST

REGIONALLY SPEAKING

Frances Ruoff

Each of AACT's 11 designated Regions is led by a dedicated Regional Representative, who serves on the AACT Board of Directors. This structure ensures that theatres and members from across the country and U.S. military overseas are connected and represented, fostering collaboration and support within the community theatre network. Frances Ruoff serves as Representative for Region II (Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania).

On the horizon for the Eastern States Theater Association (ESTA) in 2026, is a celebration of 20 years of supporting original works—the Sherman C. Ward Jr. Original Works Festival, held at Chesapeake College, April 9-12. In an effort to expand its reach, ESTA has opened up the festival to neighboring states and regions. ESTA invites any playwrights or companies interested in participating to contact Marsha Amato-Greenspan, Festival V.P. at vpfestivals@estafestival.org. All submissions received by

April 1, 2026 will be considered for ESTAFest.

Sherman Ward, in addition to his theatre involvement in New York and New Jersey, and his support of AACT, recognized the wealth of playwrights and their new works and wanted to provide the opportunity for them to be seen and recognized. This festival is a testament to that commitment.

In other news, the Pennsylvania Association of Community Theatres (PACT) has decided to restructure into three districts. Each district holds its own festival and sends the

top two or three productions to PACTFest during the first weekend in March 2026.

The Theatre Association of New York (TANYS) held its festival this past November. All entries were one-act plays, consisting mostly of new works, and with so many outstanding productions, selecting the award winner was challenging. *The Lion, the Witch*

and the *Wardrobe* was the winner and will be moving on. *A Family Affair* will also be going. A stipend is given to the winner to move on to ESTAFest, which will be held this year from April 10 - 12 at Chesapeake College in Wye Mills, Maryland.



23/62 Productions Cornerstone Theatre Arts and their production of *Scooby: A Dooby Musical Parody*, which earned the TANYS Roving Adjudicator Merit Awards.

Even with the tight schedule this year, Paul Nelson, TANYS V.P. of Adjudication, found time to continue working with adjudicator trainees, and as a result, the state organization has “launched” two new adjudicators, and the TANYS training program is as strong as ever.

I'm pleased to report that membership has rebounded in Region II since Covid. New York has collaborated with AACT's Membership Director, Karen Metheny, to compare/recruit new members and help bring others back. This collaboration has been so beneficial that I expect to expand this collaboration to other states this year.

Looking forward to what promises to be an exciting year in theatre in the Northeast!



France Ruoff's commitment to theatre spans 50-plus years as a professional actress and director in New York City. She studied adjudication with Robert Alonzo, Shirley Cockrell, and Annette Procnier, and served as Vice President of Adjudication Services and Training Coordinator for the Theatre Association on NY State [TANYS]. She helped to rewrite the TANYS Adjudication Handbook with Joel Lord. She serves on the ESTA Board, and in addition to serving as the AACT

Region II Representative, serves on the AACT NewPlayFest membership committee.





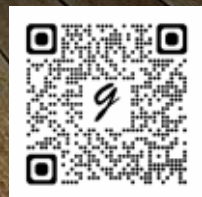
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Advocacy and Lobbying for 501(c)(3) Theatres

Quiana Clark-Roland

A significant barrier to advocacy in the theatre community is the widespread uncertainty about the rules governing lobbying and political engagement. Many organizations fear jeopardizing their nonprofit status. However, the greater risk could be in not engaging, and silencing their voices to their own detriment.

With that in mind, what follows is designed to clarify and/or serve as a refresher on what 501(c)(3) nonprofit theatres can and cannot do when it comes to advocacy and lobbying.

and money can be spent on this. It's unregulated. Advocacy is part of every nonprofit's mission to educate the general public, its members, and decision-makers on the public value and contributions of their charitable programs to the general welfare of the community or country."

According to the IRS, 501(c)(3) organizations can involve themselves in public policy issues without it being considered lobbying—providing examples such as conducting educational meetings, preparing and distributing educational materials, or discussing policy issues in an educational manner. These activities do not jeopardize an organization's tax status.

Although it is rare for service nonprofits like theaters to exceed the budgetary limits on lobbying, a 501(c)(3) organization *can* lose its tax-exempt status if "a substantial part of its activities is attempting to influence legislation."

There are two measures an organization can use to determine how much lobbying they may participate in through the IRS. The *Substantial Part Test* is vaguer and states that lobbying cannot be a "substantial part" of the activities of the organization. However, organizations can choose a clearer set of rules by selecting the *Expenditure Test*, which provides clear limits. This option replaces the vague "substantial part" rule with specific, tiered spending limits based on an organization's annual exempt purpose expenditures (the core costs a tax-exempt organization incurs to achieve its specific charitable,

Advocacy as a 501(c)(3) Nonprofit		
Do's	Limited	Don'ts
Organizing Public Education Nonpartisan Voter Education Influencing Corporations Educating Legislators Educational Conferences Regulatory Efforts Get to Know Legislators Research Training Litigation	Lobbying Candidate Forums Candidate Surveys	Partisan Politics Endorsing a Candidate or Party

Source: Arts Action Fund, "Arts Advocacy is for Everyone" (PDF) aact.org/rules01

Advocacy Versus Lobbying

Let's begin with first defining the difference between advocacy and lobbying.

Advocacy means educating legislators, the community, and other officials about your work and what your organization does.

Grassroots Lobbying means encouraging staff or advocates to ask their legislators to take a specific position or action on a specific issue.

Direct Lobbying is asking specific legislators to take a specific position or action on a specific issue.

What is absolutely prohibited? All 501(c)(3) organizations are strictly forbidden from participating or intervening in any political campaign for or against candidates for public office.

The Arts Action Fund explains that "Advocacy is NOT lobbying and it's NOT electioneering. Unlimited percentage of time

If the amount of exempt purpose expenditures is:	Lobbying nontaxable amount is:
≤ \$500,000	20% of the exempt purpose expenditures
>\$500,00 but ≤ \$1,000,000	\$100,000 plus 15% of the excess of exempt purpose expenditures over \$500,000
> \$1,000,000 but ≤ \$1,500,000	\$175,000 plus 10% of the excess of exempt purpose expenditures over \$1,000,000
>\$1,500,000 but ≤ \$17,000,000	\$225,000 plus 5% of the exempt purpose expenditures over \$1,500,000
>\$17,000,000	\$1,000,000

Source: IRS aact.org/rules02

religious, educational, or other IRS-recognized goals). Organizations electing to use the Expenditure Test must file Form 5768, *Election/Revocation of Election by an Eligible IRC Section 501(c)(3) Organization to Make Expenditures to Influence Legislation*.

What is a 501(c)(4) and how can they help?

Another option for arts advocacy and lobbying would be to support a 501(c)(4) organization that aligns with your mission. The IRS defines these as civic leagues or organizations not organized for profit, but operating exclusively for the promotion of social welfare. There are *no* budget limitations on direct or grassroots lobbying for these organizations, like the Americans for the Arts Action Fund (ArtsActionFund.org).

Your Voice Matters

Building awareness and educating your community and elected officials about the value of the arts is essential for securing long-term support. These advocacy efforts open the door to legislative benefits, robust public funding, and policies that advance your mission.

From local zoning issues and municipal occupancy taxes to state and federal arts grants, proactive advocacy is indispensable for keeping your theatre and community thriving.



Crossword

Lynn Nelson

Across

1. Who said "what fools these mortals be...?"
5. French Impressionist painter
10. Give off, as light
14. "Chestnuts roasting _____ open fire"
15. Accustom (to)
16. Hamlet, Act 3 "Let not ever the soul of"
17. Beige
18. Main artery from the heart
19. Boris Godunov, for one
20. Officer in Hamlet
22. TKTS in _____ Square
23. Black tea variety
24. Chilled
26. Poland's Walesa
28. King of the fairies
31. Rob of "The West Wing"
34. French Polynesian island
37. Mamie's man
38. Environmental & Occupational Health
39. Oberon's spouse
40. Broadway hit sign
41. Accreditation org. for zoos
42. Vinegary
43. Ollie's partner in old comedy
44. Light-sensitive eye layer
46. Kind of support
48. Discredited Subway spokesperson

The Play's the Thing

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8	9		10	11	12	13
14					15						16			
17					18						19			
20				21						22				
	23							24	25					
			26			27			28				29	30
31	32	33			34		35	36				37		
38				39							40			
41				42							43			
44			45					46		47				
		48				49			50			51	52	
53	54					55	56	57						58
59					60						61			
62					63						64			
65					66						67			

Down

1. Frost lines
2. Open, as a bottle
3. Spy author John le _____
4. Painful sandwich
5. Relating to logical argumentation
6. Form of ether
7. Spiritual teacher
8. "_____ often speaks to what words cannot..."
9. Poseidon's domain
10. Lure

11. One who hypnotizes
12. "Dies _____" (hymn)
13. Rocky pinnacles
21. Want-ad letters
22. Shinbone
25. Job posting site
27. Abhor
29. Gumbo vegetable
30. Broadway brightener
31. Cordelia's father
32. Seep slowly
33. "_____ these mortals be!"
(Shakespearean quote)
35. Head covering
36. "What's _____ for me?"
39. Argentine dance
43. In a pointed manner
45. Salt containing iodine



Lynn Nelson is from Tupelo, MS, and has been associated with AACT for almost 20 years. She currently serves as the Region IVa Rep. She has loved both theatre and crossword puzzles since her mostly misspent youth... creating these puzzles for your enjoyment is a labor of love.

Crossword answers on page 40

Neurodiversity in Community Theatre

Katrina Ploof

Editor's Note: *Neurodiversity is the concept that variations in human brains (like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and Tourette's) are natural differences, not deficits, promoting acceptance and inclusion for diverse ways of thinking and learning. We recognize the complexity of language used when discussing this subject. Some members of the neurodiverse community may prefer person-first language, while others may prefer disability-first language. In this article we have used both, based upon our conversations with the individuals involved.*

Community theatre is, at its best, a home—the kind of home built on late nights, a shared history, and the belief that every person who walks through the door deserves a place in the building.

For decades, AACT member theatres have poured their energy into making their physical spaces accessible to audiences and artists alike; more recently, they have strived to achieve thoughtful programming aimed at rectifying the underrepresentation of populations that were long left out of the community theatre narrative. But as neurodiverse artists and advocates remind us, inclusion also lives in the rhythm of a rehearsal, the tone of a note session, the structure of a day, and the willingness to ask: *What do you need to thrive here?*

Autistic playwright and director Dave Osmundsen speaks with the clarity of someone who loves theatre enough to want it to grow: “A lot of the industry folks still see autistic-centered narratives as niche, which I think is bullshit,” he says with a laugh that holds no malice—only conviction. He’s right. Neurodivergent artists are not a special annex of

community theatre—they are community theatre. And when a theatre embraces its neurodiverse artists, the whole room gets stronger, braver, and more joyful.

Across conversations with four generous, open-hearted artists, one truth rose again and again: Supporting neurodiverse performers isn’t about caring more—it’s about caring more intentionally. And this community, above all others, knows how to care.

“Include us in the process.”

Dave Osmundsen, Playwright and Dramaturg

Dave reminds us that communication is an act of respect. And if community theatre is a family, then respect is the language that holds us together.

“We’re fine adapting,” he says. “[We] just want to know that an adaptation will need to be made, so that way [we] can adapt as well.”

There is an understated generosity in that request. Neurodivergent artists don’t want special treatment—they want to be partners in the work. Theatres flourish when they remember that inclusion isn’t a policy. It’s a relationship.

“Routine, routine, routine.”

Emily Bruner, NYC Teaching Artist and Access Educator with CO_LAB Theater Group, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing theatre arts for individuals with developmental disabilities

Emily speaks about rehearsal the way some people speak about beloved family traditions: with affection and a touch of reverence.

As a teaching artist whose career has focused on work with neurodivergent audiences, students, and performers, she explains, “We start and end the same way, always. Routine, routine, routine. Huge, huge, huge.”

Her consistency is a gift. It gives performers a soft landing at the start of rehearsal and a sense of closure at the end—an emotional container that makes creativity safer. She builds rooms where everyone belongs, and you can hear her smile as she describes the ensemble agreement she utilizes with her casts at CO_LAB: respect, keep space, listen, all are welcome.

“It sounds schmaltzy,” she says with a laugh, “but it works.”

Of course it works. Community theatre is built on schmaltz—the honest, earnest kind that brings people back again and again.

“Clear your mind before you walk in the room.”

Lee Kelly, Central Florida Actor

Talking with Lee feels like sitting with someone who has spent years figuring out how to meet his own brain with compassion. His reflections on ADHD are not complaints; they are insights offered generously, as if he wants every director to understand not just him, but every actor like him.

“I always compare having ADHD to a childlike brain,” he says. “The interest... what we’re focused on is never permanent.” But he doesn’t

Crossword Solution

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resent that. He works with it. He knows the excitement that fuels him, and he knows the discipline he's had to learn.

“What I have taught myself is this: clear your mind. Before you even walk in the room, clear it.”

There is deep wisdom there—the self-awareness of a man who loves the work enough to meet it prepared.

And when he says, “Make sure you keep yourself alright... because nobody else is trying to figure that out for you,” it lands not as cynicism but as encouragement—the kind that comes from experience.

“I feel things deeply. I think about things deeply.”

Josh Kolb, NYC Actor & Playwright

Josh speaks with the open-hearted vulnerability of a neurodiverse artist who has spent years turning feeling into craft. When he says, “I feel things deeply. I think about things deeply,” you can see the intricate interior world where his performances begin.

“I’ll play a thing over and over in my head,” he says, “and I’ll go on the hamster wheel.”

There is beauty in that—the recursive thought, the emotional echo that shapes how he moves through a role.

But this depth comes with weight: “There are days where I go, ‘I don’t want to mess up.’ Not because I’m scared of the character—I’m scared of failing the people I’m working with. I’m scared that my thinking will get in the way of the work.”

It’s the most communal sentiment imaginable: a deep love of the team, the ensemble, the “we” of it all.

Josh has a remarkable ability to sense how others are feeling, and with that comes the worry about how they are feeling: “These conversations are important,” he says, “because you never know how somebody is perceiving something.”

When he describes productions where the team widened their communication to include him, exercised flexibility with time, created space, allowed for processing within rehearsal, and stayed adaptable, his joy is unmistakable: “I’ve never felt more seen, I’ve never felt more... I can’t think of the right word for it right now, but the closest word I can think of is respected. Valued.”

He reminds us that when people listen and honor individuality, solutions follow—naturally, easily, joyfully.

What Community Theatres Can Do—Today

From these four artists, a warm roadmap emerges:

- **Build predictable structures.** Routines become invitations. They’re small acts of kindness that help everyone breathe. Neurodiverse actors may rely more significantly on the calendar and the clock, but everyone in the room can benefit from that focus.
- **Communicate with transparency.** Including neurodivergent artists in re-routing and scheduling decisions early-on honors them as collaborators. Sharing information about change as quickly and clearly as possible gives neurodivergent cast members a runway on which to process and prepare.
- **Give time for focus and transition.** A few quiet minutes can be a profound expression of trust. Create backstage spaces with minimal stimuli, giving neurodiverse performers a place to land that is safe and still part of the world. You don’t need to build a new wing on your theatre—just hang some black pipe and drape, put in a couple of chairs, add a dim light, and set out a table with fidgets (hand-held objects that can be manipulated, to improve focus and reduce anxiety) and noise-cancelling earphones. (You may find all your cast members gravitating toward this respite space.)

- **Create ensemble agreements.** Shared values make a room feel safe. A rising tide really does lift all boats—by offering reassurance and commitment to your neurodiverse cast and crew members, you are offering it to everyone. An access check-in at the beginning of each week, rehearsal, or return from a break is a great way to ensure that every member of your production is being heard. Listening is everything.
- **Assign a support person.** One friendly, available human can make all the difference. Assign a crew member or ASM as a check-in person for anyone on your team who may require a little extra assistance navigating the rigor and joyful chaos of theatre. That one familiar face in a crowded day can serve as both boat and anchor, allowing for greater confidence and creativity.
- **Normalize caring conversations.** As Josh says, “These conversations are so bloody important!” Talk about it. Talk about it again. And again. Normalize communication around neurodiversity—as just another step toward a great production.

Reimagining “the way we’ve always done it”

Community theatre is powered by devotion—the total commitment to another “full-time” job, the sacrifices made by family and friends, and above all, the unabashed love of the craft and its impact. But its true magic comes from the way it holds people.

When theatres choose to embrace neurodivergent artists with intention and warmth, they don’t just create accessibility. They create community.

And as Dave and Emily both remind us, this work doesn’t only uplift a few. It “makes the whole process better for everyone.”

Community theatre has always been a place where people come as they are. Now, with more awareness and more heart, it can also be a place where they flourish.

Article contributors:

Dave Osmundsen, Playwright, Dramaturg and Conservative Small Town Survivor (he/him)

Emily Bruner, Teaching Artist, Access Educator and Community Theatre Veteran (she/her)

Lee Kelly, Actor, Podcaster and Entertainer (he/him)

Josh Kolb, Actor, Playwright and Deep Thinker (he/him)

For more information on this topic, read Dave Osmundsen’s article, “Finding Autistic Theatre Artists Is a Challenge (If You Make It a Challenge).” aact.org/osmundsen



Katrina Ploof is a native of the great state of Maine. In the past 40 years, she has directed, choreographed, or coached over 250 productions in the U.S. and Canada. 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.



Insurance Insights

Protecting Your Community Theatre Against Liability Risks

Presented by Church Mutual Insurance Company, S.I. (a stock insurer)¹

Your theatre exists to inspire, entertain and bring people together. Every production is a labor of love—but it also comes with risks that can't be ignored. If something goes wrong, the impact can be more than financial; it can threaten your mission and reputation.

From injuries and property damage to copyright disputes, liability issues can quickly turn into costly claims. The good news? You can take steps right now to help reduce those risks and keep your theatre and patrons safe and thriving.

Why you should care about liability

Liability is your legal responsibility when something goes wrong. For community theatres like yours, that could mean:

- A patron trips over a cable in the lobby.
- A volunteer gets hurt building a set.
- You accidentally use copyrighted music without permission.

Scenarios like these can lead to lawsuits, medical bills, and stress you don't need. That's why proactive risk management is essential—not just for financial protection, but for the safety of your staff, volunteers, and audience.

The biggest risks you face and how to handle them

1. Your space

Your theatre space is the heart of your operations, but it's also where most accidents happen. Slippery floors, poor lighting, and cluttered aisles are hazards that can lead to injuries.

What you can do:

- Conduct a safety inspection walk-through in your space regularly and fix hazards immediately.
- Cover cords and cables with protective covers.
- Make sure exits are clearly marked and well-lighted.
- Practice your emergency evacuation plan with staff and volunteers.

2. Volunteer and staff safety

Set building and backstage work often involve ladders, tools, and heavy lifting. Injuries can happen fast—and volunteers aren't always covered by workers' compensation.

What you can do:

- Train everyone on safety basics before they start work or participate in a production.
- Require protective gear for construction tasks.
- Post clear instructions for equipment use.
- Consider volunteer accident coverage or workers' compensation where applicable.

3. Audience safety

Crowded lobbies, slippery floors, and inadequate crowd control can lead to injuries. Even a minor injury can result in a claim.

What you can do:

- Keep floors dry and clear of clutter.
- Use ushers to manage seating and crowd flow.
- Remove props and personal items from aisles.
- Have a first-aid kit and trained staff on hand during performances.

4. Contracts and vendors

Guest performers, rental companies, and caterers can create liability headaches if contracts aren't clear. If something goes wrong, you could be held responsible.

What you can do:

- Have an attorney familiar with contract law review contracts for insurance requirements and hold-harmless clauses.
- Confirm vendors carry their own liability coverage and obtain a copy with your organization listed as an additional insured.
- Keep certificates of insurance on file for every vendor.

5. Copyright issues

Producing a play without proper licensing or using copyrighted music can result in big fines and legal trouble.

What you can do:

- Secure performance rights for every production.
- License music and design elements.
- Keep documentation of all permissions and agreements.

6. Special events and alcohol

Fundraisers and galas often involve food and drinks—adding extra risk. Serving alcohol, in particular, can lead to liability claims if not handled properly.

What you can do:

- Get special event or liquor liability coverage.
- Use licensed bartenders and check IDs.
- Set clear alcohol service policies and enforce them.

Don't forget insurance

Even with great safety practices, accidents happen. That's why liability insurance is a must. Consider the following key coverages:

- **General Liability:** Covers injuries and property damage.
- **Directors & Officers (D&O):** Protects your board from governance-related claims.
- **Volunteer Accident Coverage:** Helps with medical costs for injured volunteers.
- **Special Event Coverage:** For fundraisers and off-site events.

Work with an insurance partner who understands community theatres. They can help you get the right coverage without paying for extras you don't need.

Your next steps

- Schedule a safety walk-through of your facility before your next show.
- Review your insurance policies for gaps.
- Train your team on risk management basics.
- Keep a safety checklist handy for every production and event.

Your theatre deserves to shine—don't let liability risks steal the spotlight. By taking these steps, you can help protect your people, property, patrons, and purpose.

This information is intended solely to provide general guidance on topics that may be of interest to you. While we have made reasonable efforts to present accurate and reliable information, Church Mutual Insurance Company, S.I. disclaims all liability for any errors or omissions, or for any actions you take or fail to take based on this article. The information provided may not apply to your particular facts or circumstances; therefore, you should seek professional advice prior to relying on any information that may be found in this article.

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Royalty-Free Resources to Elevate Your Sound Design

David A. Van Cleeve

A well-designed soundscape not only elevates an entire production, but can engage your audiences in more profound and intimate ways. While many shows have sound effect packages available as licensing add-ons, most do not. Where do community theatres go to find—or even build—the required sounds to take their production to the next level?

Sound designer and engineer Kirk Longhofer shares some of his favorite budget-friendly resources for designers of all skill levels.

Tried and True for Creating Cues: Adobe Audition; Audacity

The Adobe suite, specifically Adobe Audition, has great tools and great assets. Audition is a popular tool used by theatres and designers at all levels to create and edit audio cues ([adobe.com](https://www.adobe.com)). It does come at a cost, however, so Longhofer recommends Audacity as a free alternative ([audacityteam.org](https://www.audacityteam.org)). “They call different things different things, but their workflow is fairly similar. [Audacity] can do a lot.”

Best Bet for Free (and Legal) Effects: Pixabay

“You have to be careful with sound effect libraries,” Longhofer warns. “Many of them do not allow use in live presentation; it’s just not on their radar. Their sites were created to serve YouTube and TikTok content creators.” He highly recommends pixabay.com, which is a “very deep library of sound effects, including a lot of pre-made environmentals.” They also have a pretty large collection of royalty-free music that is licensed for theatrical projects and is currently offered at no cost.

Identifying Copyright Owners: Songview

Blanket licenses from ASCAP and BMI are essential for theatres and cover pre-show music, intermission playlists, and some cabaret performances, but they do not allow for use in a production. “In order to use a piece of music within the dramatic confines of a play—from curtain up to curtain down—one must have what are called grand rights or theatrical rights. These are copyrights that are held by the author, composer, lyricist, or their designee,” Longhofer explains.

“Obtaining grand rights requires you to first identify who owns such rights, and that can be a big pain in the neck.” That’s where [Songview](https://www.songview.com).

[com](https://www.songview.com) comes in. Developed by ASCAP and BMI, Songview provides comprehensive, reliable, and consistent data on songwriters, composers, music publishers, and copyright ownership shares for the vast majority of songs licensed in the United States.

Top Royalty-Free Music Library: Envato

[Envato.com](https://www.envato.com) is an online collection that includes both music and sound effects that can be licensed for live presentations (theatre productions). “Their collection includes a wide variety of libraries that, when purchased separately, would be quite costly,” Longhofer states. “They also offer a very affordable monthly subscription.”

One of Longhofer’s favorite features of Envato is their AI Sound Alike tool “that allows you to select a song from YouTube or Spotify, and Envato will search its collection for ‘sound alike’ songs. Like all AI tools, it is sometimes spot-on. Other times, it doesn’t work as well. But it is the first sound-alike search tool that I have seen with some real value.”

Other Sites to Save

Longhofer also recommends the following resources for curating your next show’s cue list.

[Freesound.org](https://www.freesound.org) “Find any sound you like” explains the site’s home page. Just be sure to limit searches to files that are licensed under the proper Creative Commons license.

[Pond5.com](https://www.pond5.com) This site offers very reasonably priced royalty-free music that is licensed for theatre productions. It also offers an affordable monthly subscription.



About Kirk Longhofer

Kirk Longhofer is a Wichita, Kansas-based theatrical sound designer, editor, producer, and live sound engineer who has been playing with sounds and sound systems since age 12. With extensive experience designing for both musicals and plays, his sound designs are heard in educational, community, and professional theatres around the world. He is a member of the Theatrical Sound Designers and Composers Association (TDSCA), United States Institute for Theatrical Technology (USITT), and AACT. For more information about Kirk’s work, including original sound design packages available for licensing, visit [technopraxis.org](https://www.technopraxis.org).

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Patterns and How-Tos

Stephen Peithman

Designing and building costumes of other eras or cultures than our own can be challenging—calling for research, patterns, and in some cases, how-to guidance. Fortunately, expert help is available online, including the 18 resources below that costumers tell us they've found useful. (We've provided short links that take you directly to each topic-specific page.)

Research

- **Cutters Guide** offers inspiration for new designs, as well as photos and illustrations of 19th and 20th century costumes. We suggest starting with “Galleries,” where you can zero in on eras, regions, and other categories. Click on any topic for a list of books and articles that can be read online or downloaded for free. aact.org/costume1
- **The Fashion History Timeline** is part of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), whose “Time Period” options take you through each century, decade by decade, along with extensive commentaries and images. Also included are helpful articles (“essays”) and a dictionary of terms. aact.org/costume2
- **The Fashion Plate Collection** is an online archive from the University of Washington that displays hand-colored engraved plates from the 18th and 19th centuries that illustrate a spectrum of contemporary fashion. aact.org/costume3



- **The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology** is another resource from FIT—in this case, a huge gallery of color photos from the museum's collection, with an emphasis on 1900 to the present. Browse by period or categories (such as shoes and accessories, lingerie, menswear). Click on any photo for a complete description of that item. aact.org/costume4
- **The Victoria & Albert Museum** lets you search its collection of nearly 47,000 items by using the “Categories” choices (such as Designs, Drawings, Fashion, Costumes, Theatrical). Any item marked “with image” can be viewed online. aact.org/costume5

Patterns & How-Tos

- **The Antique Pattern Library** provides free, downloadable PDF copies of historical patterns and craft books, primarily from the 19th century. aact.org/costume6
- **archive.org** offers online copies of a multitude of pattern and design books—some as downloads, others that can be read as e-books after you create a free account. aact.org/costume7
- **The Genesee Country Village & Museum Historic Pattern Database**, part of the John L. Wehle Gallery, offers free downloadable patterns for 19th century garments in its permanent collection. aact.org/costume8



- **Historical Sewing** is another site focusing on the 19th century, offering sewing tutorials “to advance your costuming skills or refresh the basics,” as well as detailed photos and links to PDF workbooks it sells on Etsy. aact.org/costume9
- **The Kyoto Costume Institute** provides digital access to its vast collections of historical and contemporary fashion from around the world. It's searchable by eras, from the 1700s to the present day—including clothing, shoes, jewelry, and accessories. aact.org/costume10
- **The Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Pattern Project** provides free downloadable patterns for many historical garments in the museum's collection. Browse through color photos of costumes, then click on the down-arrow at the bottom right of any photo for a description of the garment and a link to a downloadable pattern. aact.org/costume11
- **Marquise.de** is a German website (our link is to the English-language version), with an archive of free antique sewing patterns that offer a wide range of designs from the 11th century to the Edwardian era. aact.org/costume12
- **Sew Historically** provides how-to information on creating historical costumes, as well as insights into period hairstyles, beauty and hair care. aact.org/costume13
- **Simplicity Patterns'** website includes a “Vintage” section for patterns of 20th century men's and women's clothing, which can be purchased in paper and/or PDF format. You can search by

Resource Center *continued from page 45*

decade (from the 1910s through the 1990s), by source (Butterick, McCall's, Simplicity, Vogue), by season, and sewing rating (very easy to advanced). aact.org/costume14

- **A Slip in Time** offers a list of free online historical sewing patterns, with a focus on Victorian & Edwardian menswear—although other eras are represented, as well (like a pattern for a 1950s petticoat and circle skirt). aact.org/costume15
- **Wearing History** is a pattern company with an emphasis on the Edwardian era through the 1940s. Resources include both e-pattern downloads and print-to-order versions that are shipped by mail. aact.org/costume16
- **The Wearing History Blog** is a related, but separate, site that offers a number of helpful photo tutorials. aact.org/costume17
- **YouTube** offers many video tutorials on designing and con-

structing specific costume pieces. Search for topics like “theatrical costume design” and “historical costuming”—or specific presenters like *Wearing History*, Bernadette Banner, Abby Cox, or Morgan Donner. www.youtube.com

Do you have a favorite source that's not mentioned above? Let us know by using the comments link below. We'll add reader input to an online version of this article in the coming months.



A veteran community theatre actor and director, Stephen was founding editor of Stage Directions magazine and Managing Editor of San Francisco magazine. He has served as a member of the AACT Board of Directors and developed AACT's first website. Now retired, he serves as Assistant Editor of Spotlight, and also maintains the AACT website's Resource Library, Theatre Terms, and Theatre Quotes pages.

CALENDAR

Dates	Event	St	City	Phone	Web Site
Mar 27, 2026	World Theatre Day		worldwide		world-theatre-day.org
Apr 9-12, 2026	ESTAFest Original Works Festival	MD	Wye Mills		estafestival.org/ESTAfest.php
Apr 17-19, 2026	CTMC West Coast		virtual	817-732-3177	aact.org/calendar
Apr 24-26, 2026	CTMC East Coast		virtual	817-732-3177	aact.org/calendar
May 1 - June 30, 2026	AACT NewPlayFest Call for Scripts		virtual	817-732-3177	aact.org/newplayfest-call-scripts

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