



American Association of Community Theatre

SUMMER 2026 \$5.00

# SPOTLIGHT

## MAGAZINE

### IN THIS ISSUE

Grand Rapids Civic Theatre Centennial

Star Power: Finding the Path

Educational Programming Survey

Many Wonders, Many Lessons

Theatre Traditions



"a brilliant, harrowing interpretation of Remarque's famous novel"

Karen Tophan | ChicagoOnStage.com

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Kristofer Geddie, AACT President

## PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Thank you to everyone who joined us in Salt Lake City for the Winter Adventure and Board meetings. I am always reinvigorated by the time spent with my AACT family, and this gathering was no exception. There is something truly special about being in a room with people who share a passion for storytelling and community. The conversations, laughter, and shared purpose continue to fuel the important work we all do.

A special thank-you to Hale Centre Theatre for hosting us so graciously in their incredible facilities. The performances of *Frozen* and *Peter Pan Goes Wrong* were spectacular, but for me, the icing on the cake was the premiere of *Hallmarked*, by the gifted Michael Fox. Seeing my theatre brother's success fills my heart. And as we affirmed during our strategic planning sessions—AACT has heart. We are a family, and that is what makes us strong. That sense of connection is something truly unique to this organization.

As we move into spring and summer—and toward the close of my presidency—I want to say thank you. It has been a true privilege to serve, and I am deeply grateful for each of you in this extended family. This role has been one of the most meaningful chapters of my professional journey, and one I will carry with me long after my term concludes.

I am also thankful for our incredible staff, led by Quiana, whose dedication continues to strengthen this organization every day. As we finalize our new Strategic Plan, I am excited for what lies ahead. The future of AACT is bright because of the people who believe in it. Together, we are building something that will serve generations of theatricians to come.

I hope you took my recent challenge to heart—did you invite a new member to join? Share AACT with a new theatre? I hope so. Each new connection strengthens our network and expands our impact nationwide. Growth doesn't happen by accident—it happens because each of you chooses to advocate for this organization.

Thank you for being part of this family, and for allowing me the honor of sitting at the head of the table for a little while. Remember the joy and continue to share it gener-

ously with your communities. That joy is the heartbeat of everything we do.

I look forward to seeing many of you in Venice this June, at my home theatre for aactWORLDFFEST. It will be a celebration of worldwide artistry, connection, and the incredible spirit that defines AACT—and I can't wait to welcome you all.

~ Kris



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### On the Cover

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# Upcoming Events

## AACT Board of Directors & Annual Meetings

June 15-20, 2026  
Venice Theater, Venice, Florida  
[aact.org/calendar](http://aact.org/calendar)

## aactWORLDFFEST Registrations Open

Festival Dates June 15-20, 2026  
Venice Theatre, Venice, Florida  
[venicetheatre.org/international](http://venicetheatre.org/international)

## AACT NewPlayFest 2028

*Script Submissions, Call for Reviewers*  
Spring 2026 - Deadlines vary  
[aact.org/newplayfest](http://aact.org/newplayfest)

## AACT Young Playwrights Competition

Summer 2026  
[aact.org/youngplaywrights](http://aact.org/youngplaywrights)

## AACT 2027 YouthFest Applications

Summer 2026  
[aact.org/youthfest-2027](http://aact.org/youthfest-2027)

## AACTFest 2027, Rochester, MN

VIP Registration – July 1, 2026  
Early-Bird Registration – September 1, 2026  
[aact.org/aactfest](http://aact.org/aactfest)

**AACTFest 2029 Site Selection Proposals**  
Open - Summer 2026

For a full listing of upcoming events visit  
[aact.org/calendar](http://aact.org/calendar)


Watch for new online programming this summer!


## AACT Webinars

AACT offers a carefully curated collection of virtual educational programs focusing on directing, design/tech, dramaturgy, education & youth programming, management, marketing & community outreach, and more.

Visit [aact.org/webinars](http://aact.org/webinars) for upcoming details and events.

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Peer-to-peer discussion and networking

 **Virtual Masterclasses**  
In-depth 75 to 90-minute explorations of specific skills or topics

 **Industry Connections**  
Industry providers showcase their services in 30-minute presentations

# Spotlight

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

**Spotlight Editor:** Andy Snyder

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# From Arendelle to Neverland

## Inside AACT's Winter Theatre Adventure 2026

Michelle Swink

AACT's Winter Theatre Adventure took us to Sandy, Utah, from February 13–15 this year, for a truly memorable weekend at Hale Centre Theatre. Held alongside AACT's Winter Board Meeting and Strategic Planning session, this exclusive getaway brought together AACT staff, board members, family, and friends for three packed nights of incredible theatre in the Salt Lake City area.

If you have never been to Hale Centre Theatre, it is something to see! One of the largest and most acclaimed community theatres in the country, it delivers Broadway-caliber productions on multiple, stunning stages, complete with impressive, cutting-edge technology. The facility itself is absolutely gorgeous, and going backstage gave us an even deeper appreciation for the artistry and innovation that happens behind the scenes.

We had the chance to see *Disney's Frozen*, the world premiere of *Hallmarked*, and the regional premiere of *Peter Pan Goes Wrong*. Each one offered something completely different.

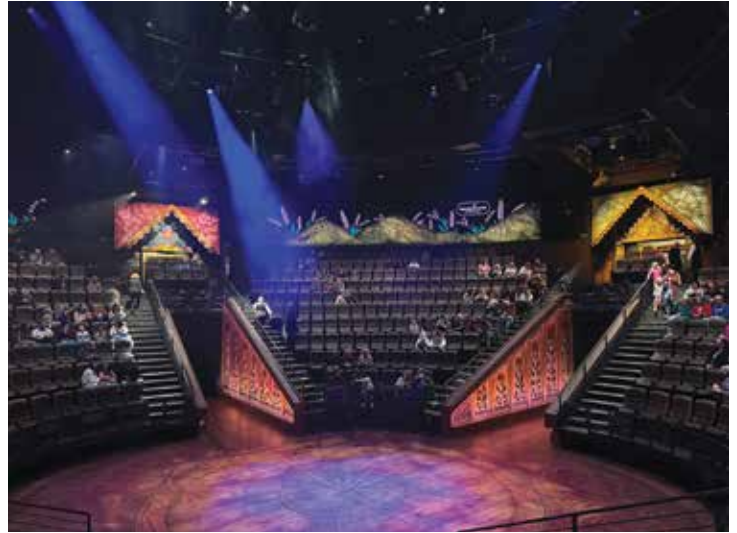


The set of *Peter Pan Goes Wrong* in the Jewel Box Stage

*Disney's Frozen*, with music and lyrics by Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez, and a book by Jennifer Lee, completely blew us away. The set, lighting, effects, and cast created a magical experience from start to finish. It was beautifully done, and felt every bit as big and breathtaking as you would hope.

*Hallmarked*, a new romantic musical comedy written by Michael D. Fox, with music and lyrics by Quinn, Dawn, and Cameron Dietlein, was especially fun to see over Valentine's weekend. Packed with catchy songs, sharp humor, and plenty of heart, it playfully pokes at Hallmark movie tropes, while still embracing the sweetness and hope that make those stories so popular. Expe-

riencing a world premiere in such a beautiful, celebratory setting made the moment even more special.



Audience members gather in the Centre Stage to see *Disney's Frozen*



AACT Winter Adventure attendees gather outside the Beehive Stage on Valentine's Day to see the premiere of *Hallmarked*

*Peter Pan Goes Wrong*, written by Henry Lewis, Jonathan Sayer, and Henry Shields, brought nonstop, high-energy hilarity. The chaos, the mishaps, the perfectly timed disasters. It was an absolute blast and kept the audience laughing from beginning to end.

Beyond the theatre, our hotel accommodations were comfortable, the scenery was beautiful, and the company was even better. A special thank you to Michael D. Fox and the entire Hale Centre Theatre team for being such generous and outstanding hosts.

It was a weekend full of laughter, connection, and exceptional theatre. Exactly the kind of experience that reminds us why we love this art form so much.



Michelle is the Marketing & Communications Specialist for AACT and a lifelong theatre artist with a passion for storytelling and community connection. She has performed in over 40 productions and has worked behind the scenes in marketing, directing, and production. She is also a voice over artist, audiobook narrator, and former talent agent.

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# Strategic Planning Update

*From AACT Executive Director Quiana Clark-Roland*

On February 14–16, 2026, members of the AACT Board, staff, and interested volunteers gathered at the Hale Centre Theatre in Sandy, Utah, for a Strategic Planning Retreat along with the winter Board meetings. The group met with strategic planning consultant Melanie Schmidt, of Timpano Consulting, to review findings and feedback gathered during recent AACT listening sessions. The last time AACT conducted a Strategic Plan was in 2019.

Three listening sessions were held online throughout the month of January 2026. These sessions were open to all AACT volunteers and anyone who wished to share feedback, allowing them to express their concerns and offer their vision for AACT's future. The themes raised in the January listening sessions directly informed the four strategic outcomes that emerged from the retreat discussions. A variety of concerns and visions were shared, including:

- The evaluation of current programs, events, and initiatives. What is working? What is not?
- Redefining representation in governance and creating new ways to assure diverse perspectives and divergent voices inform our work.
- In what ways can AACT be a better capacity accelerator for our members and a movement builder for community theatres nationwide?
- How have the needs of our membership evolved and continue to evolve, post-pandemic?
- How can the organization stay flexible in the face of uncertainty during rapid economic and technological shifts?
- How to better meet organizations where they are and on their own terms?
- And most importantly, having the hard conversation of what should we keep and what we should let go of to achieve the outcomes for the future.

AACT's Board and staff are deeply grateful to everyone who took the time to share their honest feedback. It is clear that our members are passionate and deeply invested in the future of this

organization. I would also like to say special thanks to our Strategic Planning Taskforce Chair, Allen Ebert, for his leadership and guidance during such an important and monumental endeavor.

With Melanie's guidance, AACT systematically examined the most pressing issues and distilled them into these strategic outcomes.

- Strengthen Local Theatres on Their Own Terms
- Elevate Community Theatre as Essential Civic Infrastructure
- Build a Networked Movement with Sustainable Capacity
- Modernize Structure and Governance for Focus and Durability



*AACT staff and board members discuss strategic planning ideas in a breakout group*

These long-term, organization-wide commitments will guide our decision-making, resource allocation, and priorities for the next three to five years. They are designed to work together, creating a cohesive roadmap for AACT's future.

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From here, the organization will be drafting a new vision and putting forth actionable steps to move towards each one of these goals. AACT envisions the Strategic Planning document to be a living and breathing document, expanding and contracting as the moment demands. This means the plan is intended to be a guide, not a cage. While our core outcomes will remain steady, the specific actions we take to achieve them may be adjusted as

“Community theatre brings people together to create and experience live theatre in their own communities — often providing the most accessible and locally rooted form of theatre available.”

*Timpano Consulting*

opportunities arise, challenges emerge, and we learn along the way. We will commit to regularly reviewing and updating our action plans to ensure we remain on the most effective path. AACT is committed to making this a transparent process.

The Strategic Planning Taskforce and Board met in April and May this year, to review and edit the final version for presentation to the membership, and to host a member presentation outlining the final proposal for the Strategic Plan. We appreciate those of you who joined us and provided feedback!

Following the member presentation, AACT leaders will reconvene and discuss next steps and any considerations. The final copy of the Strategic Plan will be voted on at the summer Board meetings, between June 15–20 in Venice, Florida, during actWORLDVEST. Details of the board meeting times will be posted to the AACT Calendar and Events page soon: [aact.org/calendar](http://aact.org/calendar).

Once adopted, the Strategic Plan will serve as a working framework for board and staff decision-making, with priorities, action steps, and progress reviewed on a regular basis.

The future of AACT will be shaped by its members. We hope you will join us on this journey. If you have questions, please feel free to reach out to me at [quiana@aact.org](mailto:quiana@aact.org).



*Quiana Clark-Roland is Executive Director of the American Association of Community Theatres (AACT). Previously, she was Executive Assistant and Program Manager at the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC), helping run one of the nation's largest theatre festivals. She began her career as Administrative Assistant at the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance. She holds an M.S. in Arts Administration from Drexel University and a B.A. in Arts Administration from the University of Kentucky. She is a mother of two and passionate arts advocate.*



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The first state community theatre festival will be held at the end of this summer—less than a year away from AACTFest 2027, our national festival in Rochester, Minnesota, June 16-19, 2027.

We've just launched a dedicated AACTFest webpage, packed with tools, tips, and the tentative schedule for the State and Regional festivals that lead to the national festival. For more info, visit [aact.org/aactfest](http://aact.org/aactfest).

Don't see your state festival listed? Don't worry, the door is still wide open! Contact the AACT Office to discover alternate routes to get in on the action.

Need funding assistance? Through the support of the AACT Endowment, groups that qualify for the National Festival will receive significant travel funds to ease the financial burden. In 2025, qualifying groups walked away with \$4,380 each. Also, check with your state and regional organization to see what may be available there.

We'll keep updating the festival chart as new information comes in from the states and regions. So check back often, and start getting ready!



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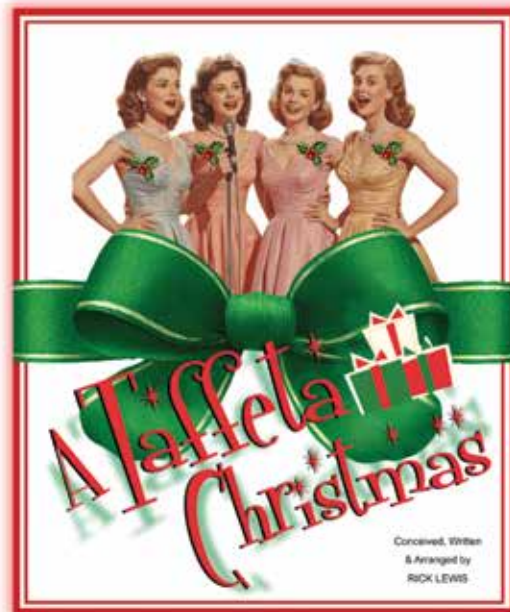
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## How Community Theatre Shaped Jeff Kready's Broadway Journey

Katrina Ploof

When I sat down to talk with actor Jeff Kready, what struck me first wasn't the Broadway résumé—though it's an impressive one. It was how grounded he is. Thoughtful, soft-spoken, and genuinely reflective, he talks about his career with a kind of humility that makes you lean in a little closer.

Jeff is currently starring in *Operation Mincemeat*, and audiences may also know him from *The Great Gatsby*, *Company*, *Tootsie*, and a number of other Broadway musicals. But as we began our conversation, it became clear very quickly that, in his mind, the story doesn't start there.

"When I look back on it," he told me, "I know that my training as an actor really started in community theatre."

And he meant it.

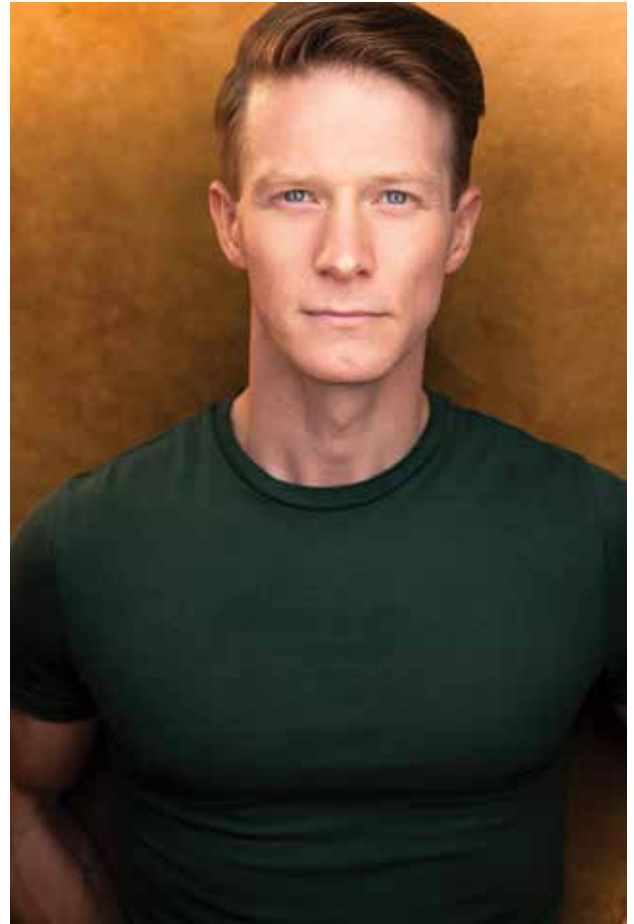
### The Beginning: Where It All Took Hold

Jeff grew up in a musical family—singing was just part of life. But the moment things shifted from casual to something more intentional came when he was cast as Winthrop in *The Music Man* as a fourth grader.

He laughs a little when he talks about it now, but you can still hear how much it meant.

"I loved it so much that I just threw myself into it," he said. "From then on, I knew I had a goal."

*continued on page14* ▷



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Star Power continued from page 13

Not long after, he played the title role in *Oliver!* at Topeka Civic Theatre, and that experience—getting to carry a show at such a young age—really cemented things for him. By sixth grade, he remembers telling his mom, very matter-of-factly, that he was going to be an actor.

What's interesting is that when Jeff talks about those early years, he doesn't focus on the roles as much as the people.

He talks about the rooms.

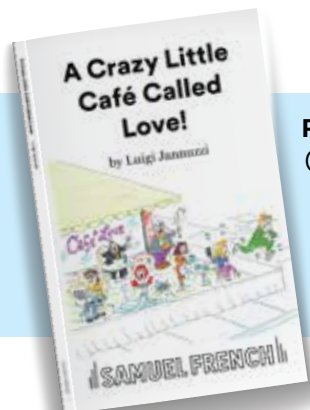
## Learning by Being in the Room

Jeff didn't go to college for theatre. In fact, he studied music education and even spent a year teaching before ultimately stepping away to pursue acting.

But when he talks about where he actually learned to be an actor, there's no hesitation.

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“A rollercoaster ride of plot,  
character & comedy!”



It was community theatre.

“It was being in shows with people that were better than me,” he said. “That’s how I learned. I could watch them and figure out what they were doing and how to make that my own.”

There’s something so recognizable in that for those of us who came up the same way. Sitting in the wings, watching someone nail a moment night after night. Paying attention. Trying it yourself the next time.

That was his training.

Not formal. Not structured. But real.



Jeff Kready in *Oliver!* at Topeka Civic Theatre and Academy in 1994

## The Gift of Being Built Up

As we talked about the transition from teaching to performing full-time, I found myself wondering what gave him the courage to make that leap. It’s not a small decision.

His answer was simple—and telling.

“Everyone [In theatre] built me up,” he said. “My whole life, they encouraged me. Without that support... I don’t know that I would have had the courage to take those steps.”

There’s something powerful in that idea—that a community theatre doesn’t just produce shows, it produces confidence. It creates a space where someone can begin to believe that maybe they belong in this work.

For Jeff, that belief carried him into summer stock, into his first professional jobs, and eventually to New York.

Even then, though, he admits it didn’t feel real right away.

## When It Starts to Feel Real

His Broadway debut came with *Les Misérables*, but even that didn't immediately feel like arrival.

**“That was when I thought, okay... this is actually my life now.”**

“It still felt like a dream,” he said. “Even when we got our closing notice, I thought—maybe this was just one incredible experience.”

It wasn't until he booked his next show, *Sunday in the Park with George*, that something shifted.

“That was when I thought, okay... this is actually my life now.”

There's no bravado in the way he says it. If anything, it sounds like quiet surprise.

## What He Knows Now

Toward the end of our conversation, I asked Jeff what he might say to his younger self, knowing what he knows now.

He didn't rush the answer.

“I think I would tell myself to just be the best version of me,” he said.



*Kready as Hester on Broadway in Operation Mincemeat*

He talked about how long it took him to stop trying to guess what casting directors wanted, and instead trust his own instincts.

“When I finally did that, auditions got easier,” he said. “They got more fun. And I started booking more work.”

It's the kind of insight that sounds simple—but anyone who's been in an audition room knows how hard-won that understanding really is.

## What Community Theatre Can Do

When I asked Jeff what community theatres can do to better support young artists, I expected something about training or mentorship.

Instead, he talked about programming.

“The *variety* of shows matters,” he said. “That's how you figure out where you fit.”

He described moving between classic musicals and newer, more unexpected, pieces, all within the same theatre. That range gave him the chance to explore, to stretch, and to discover what kind of performer he wanted to be.

“If you only see one kind of theatre,” he said, “you might miss something.”

It's such a practical answer—but also a deeply meaningful one. Opportunity isn't just about access. It's about exposure.

## Carrying It Forward

What stayed with me after our conversation wasn't just Jeff's story—it was the way he tells it.

There's a throughline of gratitude in everything he says: for the people who taught him, often without realizing it; for the spaces that gave him room to grow; for the chance to keep doing the work.

Community theatre, in his life, wasn't just the beginning.

It was the foundation.

And listening to him, it's clear that foundation is still very much with him—on every stage he steps onto.



*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.*

[aact.org/comments](https://aact.org/comments)



# Grand Rapids Civic Theatre Celebrates 100 Years

## *Michigan's largest community theatre marks centennial with landmark season and a look toward the future*

Quiana Clark-Roland

When eight theater enthusiasts gathered in 1926 at Ottawa Hills High School, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, they likely couldn't have imagined that their modest "little theater" experiment would evolve into a cultural institution still thriving a century later.

But this year, Grand Rapids Civic Theatre and School of Theatre Arts (GRCT) is celebrating exactly that: its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a milestone that makes it one of the oldest community theatres in Michigan and one of the oldest in the United States.

### A Century of Survival and Growth

The story of GRCT mirrors the resilience of the community it serves. Born in the Roaring Twenties as the "Civic Players," the organization initially produced four plays at St. Cecilia Auditorium. Early prosperity led to a move to Germania Hall. And then came an economic downturn.

Membership plummeted and funds began to run low. In a moment that would become legendary in the theatre's history, in 1928, the Civic Players organized a debate between famous lawyer Clarence Darrow and Dr. Alfred Wishart, pastor at the city's Fountain Street Church. Three years earlier, Darrow had defended high school science teacher John Scopes for teaching evolution in the public schools (the basis for the 1950s play and film, *Inherit the Wind*). The Grand Rapids debate, titled "Concerning a General Purpose in the

Universe," drew huge crowds and netted \$2,000, \$38,000 in 2026 dollars, enough, it is said, for the theatre to survive.

By 1940, season ticket membership had grown to 1,600, with each of six productions drawing more than 4,000 patrons. The 1950s brought new challenges, as competition for entertainment dollars increased, forcing staff reductions. The theatre group reorganized and charted a new course.

In 1960, GRCT hired its first professional artistic director, Paul Dreher. Under his tenure, the theatre continued to grow, expanding to include theatre classes and increasing its patron base.

### Finding a Permanent Home

In 1979, the theatre moved to its present home: the turn-of-the-century Majestic Theater, built in 1903. With expertise from construction company Owen, Ames and Kimball, the theatre structure and three adjacent buildings were renovated into The Grand Rapids Civic Theatre complex, opening its doors to the public in October 1979.

The building underwent a \$6 million renovation, beginning in 2018 and completed in 2022, ensuring the historic venue remains viable for another generation.

Today, GRCT stands as one of the largest community theatres in Michigan and a leading institution nationwide, reaching more than 100,000 people annually through more than 100 performances on the historic stage.



## The Centennial Season

For its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, GRCT has curated a season blending Inaugural Productions—shows appearing on the Civic stage for the first time, with legacy productions, audience favorites returning to the theatre's historic canon. The eight-title lineup features larger casts that offer more volunteer opportunities, strong name recognition, and broad appeal. The season includes:

- ***Come From Away***, the musical by David Hein and Irene Sankoff, opening on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11
- ***Dragons Love Tacos***, by Ernie Nolan, based on the beloved children's book by Adam Rubin
- ***Annie***, the perennial family favorite, by Thomas Meehan, Charles Strouse, and Martin Charnin
- ***A Chorus Line***, the groundbreaking musical exploration of dancers' lives, by James Kirkwood, Nicholas Dante, Marvin Hamlisch, and Edward Kleban
- ***Dear Evan Hansen***, the Tony-winning musical by Steven Levenson, Benj Pasek, and Justin Paul
- ***Finding Nemo JR***, a musical adaptation of the beloved 2003 movie, by Lindsay Anderson, Kristen Anderson-Lopez, and Robert Lopez
- ***Our Town***, the classic American drama by Thornton Wilder
- ***Les Misérables***, closing the Centennial Season with the epic musical tale of passion and revolution, by Alain Boubill, Claude-Michel Schönberg, and Herbert Kretzmer

By the time the theatre officially turns 100 in November 2026, GRCT will have produced 798 full productions.

## Community-Wide Celebration

Executive Director Erik Wolenberg has been with the organization since November 2024. "My wife and I have been attending shows since 2013, and my children began participating in classes and camps for several years," he said. "Civic holds a special place in our family, just as it does for countless others across generations."

Describing his hopes for the theatre's future, Wolenberg says, "We are in a unique moment of re-engagement. As West Michigan experiences significant growth, we're finding new ways to be a part of it, while honoring our history and our craft. This presents a powerful opportunity to reconnect with audience members who perhaps haven't returned since the pandemic. With incredible talent both onstage and behind the scenes, dedicated to giving back to our community, we are focused on enhancing the experience for our core audience and bringing people back to the theatre, reminding them of the world-class entertainment right here in their own backyard."

In addition to an impressive season listing, a series of citywide events and initiatives will be planned throughout the year, designed to deepen community ties and boost fundraising efforts. Highlights include a Centennial Gala, a community Block Party, and education and production partnerships with local businesses, nonprofits, and schools.

A Centennial Committee, composed of Civic Theatre staff, community and board members, is coordinating the celebration events. Wolenberg notes, "We wanted a mix of voices represented on the committee, a very diverse and broad set of viewpoints for all of the things we are planning for the centennial."

## People Power

When asked why GRCT was able to make it to 100 years, special advisor Bruce Tinker, who has previously served as both Executive and Artistic Director, credited the people. He shared the story of one couple whose first date was a show at Civic Theatre back in the 1950s. As students, they bought tickets throughout their college years in Grand Rapids, and that connection to the theatre has lasted a lifetime. They evolved from supporters to members of the leadership team, serving on both the board and the endowment board.

"So, it's people like that who have made the theatre what it is today," Tinker explained. "And we still have a lot of incredibly dedicated people." He cited the example of a gentleman who took early retirement when a local plant closed about 15 years ago. After spend-

*continued on page 18* ▷

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**Grand Rapids Centennial** *continued from page 17*

ing five years with Habitat for Humanity, he eventually found his way to the theatre, where he has been a constant presence ever since, virtually every day, helping with building maintenance. “Anyway, it’s just people like that who are incredible inspirations, people living genuine lives of service.”

Or, perhaps most notably, it’s people like major donors Fred and Lena Meijer, who came to every show and whose financial support is reflected in the venue’s new name, the Meijer Majestic Theatre.

**The Next 100 Years**

Regarding advice he would give to other theatres planning a milestone, Wolenberg recommends, “Give yourselves lots of time to create the plan and framework to work through it and account for contingencies. It is a whole beast in itself to truly engage the community, whether you are celebrating ten years or 100 years, especially alongside regular operations and programming. If the audience is not excited about what you’re bringing to them, then nobody is going to show up. Find ways to be intentional, collaborative, and thought-provoking.”

He advises planning at least two to three years in advance, especially if you are looking to engage donors and sponsors who will want to know your goals and who will need time for budgeting. Start engaging and talking with subsets of the community—such as other nonprofits, schools, and businesses—during that timeframe to start a dialogue and cultivate buy-in.

As GRCT celebrates this historic milestone, it remains focused on the future. With a legacy of volunteer spirit, financial self-suffi-

ciency, and artistic excellence, the organization stands as a pillar in Grand Rapids’ cultural community.

“What drew me to my current position is the ability to help represent and reflect the community as a whole,” Wolenberg says. “Our volunteers spend so much time creating something special to give it back to the community they love. It is a challenge at times, but it is an honor to have this challenge, and to be able to support our people and our mission.”

To learn more about GRCT visit [grct.org](http://grct.org)



GRCT volunteers and patrons gather in the lobby during an event



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# Inside the Fence: The Quiet Power of Dramaturgy

## *How a dramaturg can help every theatre, large or small, tell the same story together*

Katrina Ploof

Community theatre is built on generosity—of time, of knowledge, of talent. Volunteers give their evenings, designers stretch small budgets into magic, and audiences arrive ready to be transported. In the middle of all that shared effort sits one central question: *How do we make sure everyone is telling the same story?*

One surprisingly effective answer is the use of a dramaturg.

### Putting Everyone Inside the Same Fence

At its heart, a dramaturg acts as a bridge between the play and the production, helping everyone involved in a play or musical occupy the same imaginative space. When actors, designers, directors, and audiences share the same clear understanding of the world of the play, storytelling becomes focused and powerful.

Think of dramaturgy as building a fence around the creative field. Inside that fence, everyone is playing in the same world—guided by shared context, research, and understanding. The result is not restriction but clarity. It allows each artist to contribute freely, while still supporting a unified vision.

### Making Sense of an Ocean of Information

Today's artists have access to more information than ever before. With a few clicks, we can find articles, images, videos, commentary, and opinions about nearly any play or musical. The challenge is that not all of that information is reliable—or useful.

A dramaturg helps manage that flood.

Rather than asking each member of the creative team to sort through endless research on their own, the dramaturg gathers, evaluates, and organizes information so that it flows constructively through the production. Each collaborator receives the kind of material that serves their specific needs.

- Directors may need broad thematic or historical context.
- Designers might need visual references and period details.
- Actors often need cultural insights or character-related information.

The dramaturg acts as a filter—removing speculation and sensationalism, and keeping the rehearsal room grounded in thoughtful, well-sourced information.

### A Resource for the Whole Creative Team

One of the most valuable aspects of dramaturgy is responsiveness. A dramaturg is trained to recognize the unique needs of the people involved in a production and provide the right kind of support at the right moment.

For directors and designers, that might include research on historical periods, political climates, or cultural influences that shape the world of the play. Sometimes a single piece of information—a photograph, a diary entry, a historical anecdote—can unlock a design solution or illuminate a staging idea.

For actors, dramaturgy often provides tools to deepen character work. Questions about social customs, language, class structure, or cultural norms can suddenly make a character's choices clearer and more truthful. Instead of every artist searching alone, the dramaturg becomes a shared resource—someone whose job is to help the story become clearer.



*Dramaturg and production team gather for a collaborative roundtable discussion*

### Reaching the Audience

Dramaturgy doesn't only live in the rehearsal room. It also helps build a richer connection between the production and its audience. Many community theatres already do this instinctively through program notes, lobby displays, or pre-show discussions. A dramaturg can help shape and expand those materials in ways that are engaging and accessible.

Public-facing dramaturgy can include:

- Educational materials designed for different grade levels when student groups attend performances
- Historical and contextual information for marketing and publicity
- Lobby displays that enrich the audience's experience of the play
- Pre-show talks or discussions that introduce themes and background

These efforts invite audiences into the story more fully. When viewers understand the world of the play, they often connect with it more deeply.

### Dramaturgy on Any Budget

One of the most encouraging things about dramaturgy is that it doesn't have to be limited to large theatres with large budgets. In an ideal situation, a trained dramaturg is available in your community or online, and the production budget allows you to pay that professional for their time, training, and expertise. Professional dramaturgs bring specialized skills and a depth of knowledge that can greatly enrich a production. In community theatre, however, that level of support is not always possible.

When a professional dramaturg isn't available, having someone take on some of the basic research and support work can still be valuable.

In those circumstances, the role might be filled by a volunteer who enjoys research, a teacher who likes connecting history with storytelling, a student interested in theatre studies, or a company member who has a talent for organizing information. While this

**“Through a dramaturg, storytelling becomes focused and powerful.”**

isn't a substitute for a trained dramaturg, it can still provide useful context and support for the production.



*Research, context, and creative insight are elements that enrich the production process*

The role itself can be as large or as small as the production requires. Sometimes it means preparing a short research packet and helping answer questions during rehearsal. Other times it may include program notes, a small lobby display, or other simple ways of sharing context with the audience.

At its core, dramaturgical work helps the company better understand the world of the play they are creating together. Even modest efforts in that direction can make a meaningful difference.

## A Shared Story

Community theatre thrives on collaboration. Directors, performers, designers, musicians, and volunteers all bring their talents to the table in order to tell one story. A dramaturg helps ensure that story is built on shared ground.

By gathering information, supporting artists, and enriching the audience's experience, dramaturgy quietly strengthens the entire production. It doesn't replace anyone's creativity—it simply gives that creativity a common foundation.

And in the welcoming, inventive world of community theatre, that shared foundation can make all the difference.



*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.*




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# Education Survey of Community Theatres

Michael Cochran

Many community theatres take pride in the fact that young people and adults who first stepped onto their stages later pursue professional careers in the arts. For some theatres, simply producing shows is their core form of arts education. For others, as the number of productions and budgets grow, participants—both adults and youth—seek opportunities to refine their skills to pursue larger roles or gain more technical experience.

Providing classes creates additional opportunities for participants to develop their craft and offers newcomers an entry point to “sample” theatre before committing to a production. Classes also teach valuable life skills such as communication, emotional expression, and teamwork—skills that benefit students well beyond the arts. With more than 7,000 community theatres across the country, educational programming within community theatre plays a vital role in arts learning nationwide. What’s more, it can improve the quality of productions and strengthen a theatre’s financial sustainability.

With these thoughts in mind, we recently invited theatres to take part in a survey that would shed light on what types of programming are offered (including when and how), and the age groups they serve, as well as program costs and revenue.

Seventy-three theatres responded to the survey. The two largest budget categories—\$100,000–\$250,000 (26%) and \$250,000–\$500,000 (16%)—accounted for 42% of respondents.

The next combined segment—budgets under \$25,000 (11%), \$25,000–\$50,000 (11%), and \$50,000–\$100,000 (8%)—represented 30% of theatres.

The remaining group—\$500,000–\$1 million (14%), \$1 million–\$2 million (10%), and \$2 million and above (4%)—accounted for 28% of respondents.

## The Business Side

For theatres that offer classes, educational programming can also serve as a revenue source. Forty-two percent of theatres reported generating a surplus of income over expenses from classes, while 28% reported breaking even.

Educational programming accounted for just over 20% of total annual income across all revenue sources. Respondents also reported that an average of 17% of their contributed income was tied to support for educational programming.

Average tuition per class hour was relatively low. The largest group of theatres (17%) reported charging less than \$5 per hour. Thirteen percent reported charging \$5–\$7.50 per hour, another 13% charged \$7.50–\$10 per hour, 12% charged \$10–\$15 per hour, and 13% charged \$15–\$20 per hour. Tuition fees above \$20 per hour were reported by fewer than 3% of theatres.

Teacher compensation per class hour most commonly fell in the \$20–\$25 range, reported by 19% of theatres. This was followed by \$15–\$20 per hour (15%). The third largest group (12%) reported paying \$30–\$40 per hour.

Total expenses for educational programming—excluding in-kind contributions—varied widely. Twenty-four percent of theatres reported spending less than \$5,000 annually, followed by 15% spending \$5,000–\$10,000. The third largest group (14%) reported expenses between \$100,000 and \$250,000. This range largely reflects the wide differences in the size of theatre budgets.

When analyzing education offerings, it is important to understand the scope and scale of programming relative to organizational budgets, so that comparisons can be made on a more “apples-to-apples” basis.

## School-Year Semester or Extended-Length Classes

When asked about classes offered during the school year (fall through spring), 72% of responding theatres reported they offer no classes for pre-school-aged students. Between 51% and 58% reported offering no classes for elementary through high school students.

Adult classes were also limited, with 46% of theatres reporting that they do not offer any.

Among theatres that do provide school-year instruction, between 5% and 15% offer both theatre and dance classes. Approximately 15%–23% offer only theatre classes, while just 2%–5% offer only dance classes. (Those offering dance-only classes typically serve high school or adult students.)

## School-Year Class/Production Programs

Another common format is the “class-to-production” model, often referred to as “pay-to-play.” These programs are frequently used for youth musicals such as the Kids or Junior versions offered by publishing companies.

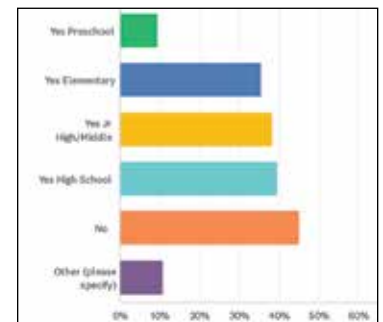
For students ranging from preschool through high school age:

- Nearly 40% of theatres charge a fee for classes that culminate in a production during the school year.
- 11% offer these programs, but do not charge a fee.
- 45% do not offer class-to-production programs during the school year.

Among theatres offering these programs:

- 35% produce 1–2 classes/productions
- 20% produce 3–4 classes/productions
- 14% produce five or more

Q7 During the school year do you offer limited time period (less than 4 weeks in length) Theatre or Dance workshops or special classes at your theatre for any school age students under 18?



## Workshops During the School Year

More than half of responding theatres (51%) reported offering no workshops during the school year.

Among those that offer workshops combining theatre and dance instruction:

- 5% serve preschool students
- 28% serve elementary students
- 28% serve middle school students
- 36% serve high school students

Adult workshops are more common, with 56% of theatres offering workshop opportunities for adults.

*continued on page 24* ▷



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Educational Programming Survey *continued from page 22*

## Summer Camps and Classes

Summer programming is significantly more common.

Among theatres offering classes:

- 53% offer preschool through middle-school classes
- Just under 50% offer high school classes
- 45% offer adult classes

Approximately 20% offer both theatre and dance classes during the summer.

Summer camps that use the class-to-production model are offered by 67% of theatres for elementary through high school students. An additional 5% offer these camps without charging a participation fee, while 23% do not offer them at all.

Among theatres offering summer production camps:

- 37% produce one production
- 17% produce two productions
- 10% produce three productions
- 9% produce four productions
- 7% produce five productions
- 7% reported producing ten or more productions during the summer

Note: Our survey did not measure the level of production support provided (full, partial, or limited).


## Classes That End in a Production

When examining production-based classes overall, 53% of theatres do not offer them.


Among those that do:

- 30% charge a fee for participation
- 13% offer production classes at no cost




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## Classes with Local Partners and Touring

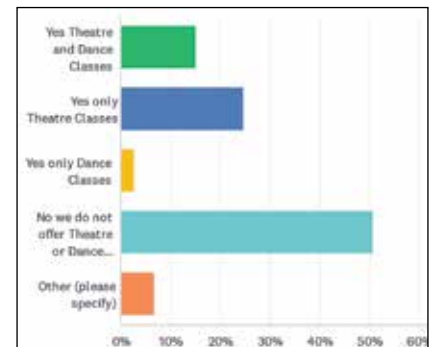
Offering classes in schools or through community partnerships can help reach underserved communities that may not have the ability to travel to a theatre facility. These programs can generate income through school fees, while also opening opportunities for grant funding from local and national foundations.

Transportation is often one of the biggest barriers for low-income students—even when scholarships are available. In-school or after-school programming can help address this challenge.

Survey results showed:

- 15% of theatres offer classes in public or private schools
- 7% provide programs funded by schools
- 8% offer programs without receiving payment
- Less than 3% partner with parks and recreation departments or public libraries

Additionally, 15% of theatres tour productions to schools, libraries, or daycare centers.



## Students Served

Not surprisingly, theatres with larger budgets and more extensive educational programming serve more students. Across the full survey:

- 28% serve fewer than 50 students annually
- 26% serve 51–100 students
- 19% serve 101–299 students
- 12% serve 300–500 students
- 5% serve 500–750 students

## Conclusion

Theatres that offer educational programming create a pipeline of future participants who help sustain and grow the organization. Some theatres have also discovered that expanding beyond acting classes to include dance and other performance training can create strong revenue streams.

Community theatres are a powerful force in building the future of the performing arts. The work done in community theatre does more than create great entertainment—it develops a creative workforce for the future that employers are looking for. Because of this impact, it is important for theatres to advocate the scope and the outcomes of their educational work with elected officials and businesses for grants, sponsorships, and contributions.

A longer version of this article is available online. It includes information on internships, apprenticeships and theatre trips, and adds additional graphs and data, broken down by budget size. [aact.org/edsurvey](https://aact.org/edsurvey)

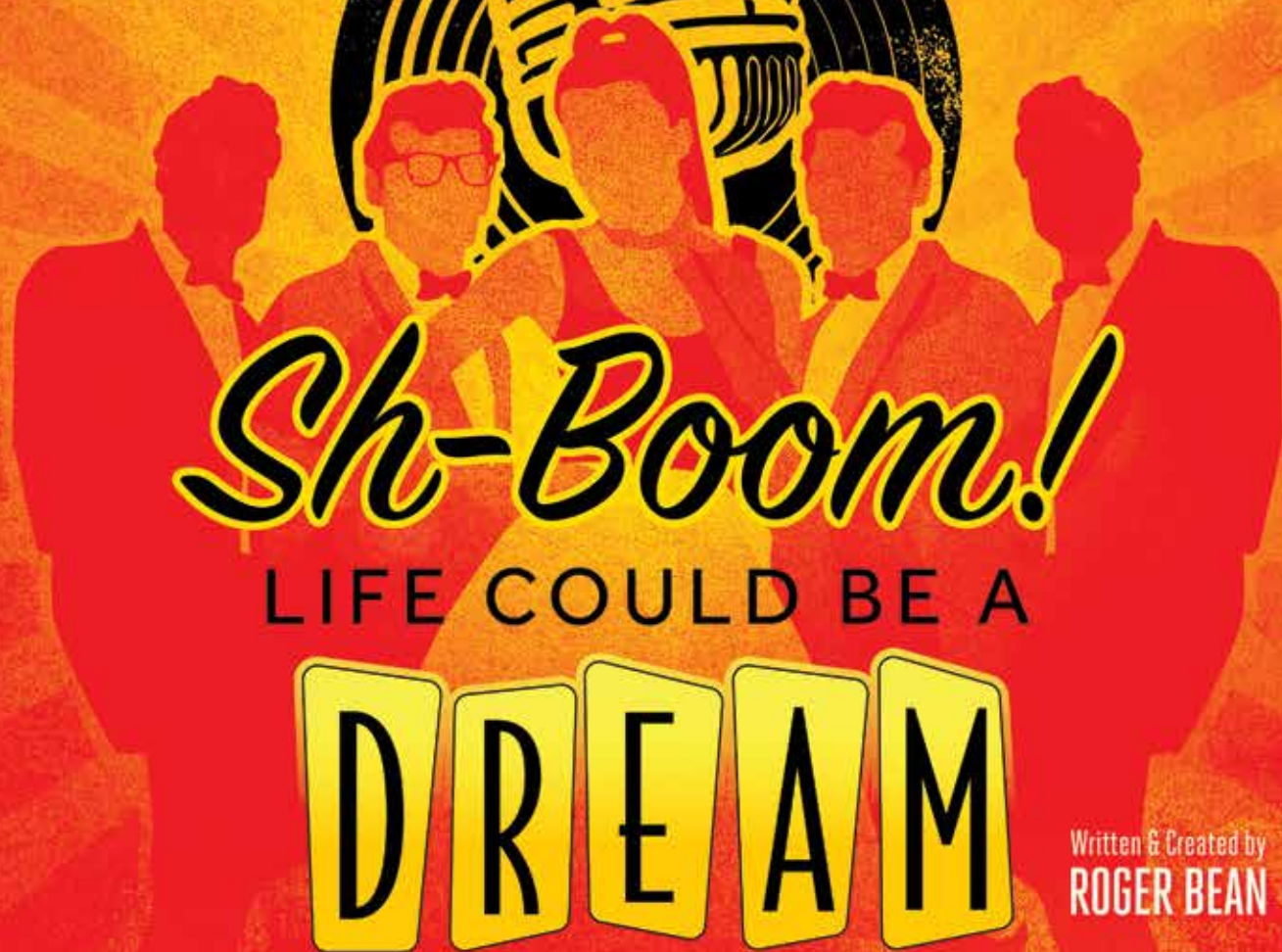


Michael Cochran has worked in all aspects of theatre winning awards in acting, directing, and designing during his career. He has worked professionally in theatre, television and film in Chicago and Kansas City. He spent over 40 years at the Market House Theatre in Paducah KY and recently retired as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



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# Many Wonders, Many Lessons

## *Travels with Morrie*

Mary Doveton

How many of us have gone back into our theatres after the audience has left? How many of us have savored the “vibes” that still seem to float around the space. We can almost feel the energy left behind from the laughter and music, and the faint pulse of shared emotions that bonded a group of people together for a short time in that dedicated space.

Now take those feelings a giant step further back. Imagine yourself sitting in a theatre that has soaked up the hopes and fears and happiness of men and women for thousands of years.

Morrie Enders, Executive Director of the Lincoln Playhouse, knows that feeling and is eager to share it. He has led two theatre trips to Greece, exploring not only the magnificent food and mythic islands, but ancient theatres that birthed our own theatrical traditions. With an itinerary that took the group from the ancient Theatre of Dionysus in Athens to the beaches on the Island of Skopelos (where the motion picture *Mamma Mia* was filmed), the travelers experienced an exciting insight into an earlier world.

Their travels took them to Thorikos, an ancient theatre set on a hillside overlooking the sea, that dates back to about 500 BCE. They saw Epidaurus, where a whisper on the stage reaches the top tier of seats, and the Odeon, a theatre so steeply raked that Morrie described climbing into the seats almost like becoming a mountain goat. The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens seats 17,000 people. And Delphi is a place so atmospheric that you can sit on a stone and feel the songs of a priestess whispering prophecies in your ear.

For Morrie these trips have become pilgrimages to a time when theatre was an integral part of people’s lives. In fact, he notes that civic entities often had the opportunity to choose to sponsor either a battleship or a play! Most importantly, Morrie learned that when archeologists are studying the layouts of the ancient cities, they often look for the proximity between the hospitals and the theatre. The two

were considered to be healing partners, sharing a holistic approach. They sought harmony of mind, body, and spirit. Movement was considered to be part of the soul, and healing, an art form.

Plays were generally part of religious festivals seeking a “catharsis”—an emotional release achieved by a communal exploration of relationships, conflicts, and actions between men, women, and gods. Oedipus was born here. Antigone valiantly braved authority. Medea left in a golden chariot with her murdered children. The Greek citizenry came together to



Morrie visiting the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens that once seated 17,000 people.

experience these tragedies, as well as the comedies of Aristophanes, and to leave changed, released and in harmony with themselves and their neighbors.

Morrie points out that in our own time, numerous studies are slowly bringing us back to that realization of art/health connectivity. In 2017 a British study by researchers at University College London tested audiences at the Savoy Theatre during performances of *Dreamgirls*. Their results found that a shared emotional experience like that can create a common rhythmic physiological response, with participants’ heartbeats increasing and decreasing in unison. This was specifically linked to the live, in-person



On the road with Morrie headed to Messini, one of Greece’s most spectacular archeological sites.

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*A night performance at the steeply raked Odeon Theatre*

experience and, in fact, triggered such a strong response that it was likened to doing 30 minutes of cardio!

In exploring these ancient sites, Morrie found a validation for what we all do today in our own theatres. The very act of coming together to share emotions in the face of isolation and loneliness may have started with the Greeks, but we continue to reinforce it every day. The emotions that were explored by the ancient Greeks, near their olive groves, continue to be shared on our city stages. Generations have been brought together for these tales of love and lust, honor and betrayal, happiness and horror.

Morrie admits he didn't know beforehand how much he would be moved by what he experienced—until he found himself under an intense and cloudless blue sky, with a backdrop of olive groves covering the hills, standing on the stage at Epidaurus and sharing these lines from Sophocles' ancient tragedy, *Antigone*, with his Nebraska friends:

*Many wonders, many terrors,  
But none more wonderful than the human race  
Or more dangerous.*

Morrie regards his two trips to Greece as “an opportunity to go and immerse oneself in a culture where theatre was central to life.”

For years he has preached the gospel of “social change masquerading as a theatre event,” and eagerly points to programs like The Penguin Project® as evidence that the relationships we see between people on stage and in rehearsals are not simply manifestations of the characters they portray. They also reflect the changes that result as people working together. In the Grecian sun, on the ancient Greek stones, Morrie found a civilization that lived that belief, and left behind seeds that he sees in our current theatrical traditions.

He passionately describes the adventure as a lofty and affirming experience. That said, when asked what he was most surprised by, Morrie laughs, and says it was learning there is no lettuce in a true Greek salad!



*Morrie at Epidaurus, where the acoustics are so great that a whisper onstage can be heard in the last row.*

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*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.*



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# Spotlight Award

**Chad Hembree**, Executive Director of Spotlight Acting School and The Spotlight Playhouse in Berea, Kentucky, has a new “spotlight” to point to—having been presented with AACT’s long-standing Spotlight Award, which recognizes special local achievement by individuals, companies, or organizations.

For 13 years, he has grown the school into a thriving and rich theatre, not just for its community, but for the entire region. He has launched multiple programs and initiatives to diversify and expand community engagement and support access to the arts. Through his leadership, the Playhouse has created a community theatre troupe, The Bluegrass Players, who perform over 30 productions each season. As a playwright, he has harnessed his passion for playwrighting to create a community play festival, highlighting new plays by local playwrights.



He created dinner shows to fund scholarships for students who could not otherwise afford the Acting School tuition, resulting in sell-out performances, drawing audiences from out of state, and building a following of over 500 members.

Since his arrival, the Acting School has grown to 175 students, and The Bluegrass Players has over 35 members and counting. Those increases are due to Hembree’s leadership—his attitude and passion for the theatre, his infectious personality, his inclusion of all people, his encouraging nature, his push for high-quality performances, and his persistence in seeing the theatre thrive—during and after the pandemic, when many theatres had to permanently close.

He also started “Pay What You Can” performance nights to encourage and ensure that all people who want to be a part of the theatre can have that opportunity. He writes weekly articles that are published online and in printed programs. He oversees 200-plus performances in the Playhouse each season, as well as maintenance of the facility and management of the staff.

In addition, he has established a film school and creative arts camps that offer different theatre experiences and summer intensive programs, partnering with other community groups like Feed Madison County. He also has worked with the local school system’s summer programs. He has reinvigorated the arts in the community by creating meaningful opportunities to connect, educate, and engage the region, leaving a lasting impact on both its economic vitality and artistic ecosystem.

*When I think of who has had the most impact on the world of theatre in our area, there is no one more representative of that title and respect than Chad Hembree. Ask anyone in our city, our county, or our region who the biggest and most expansive theatre company is, and they will say “Spotlight.” And that is due to “Mr. Chad.” He absolutely embodies all the attributes of this award and the key components of everything AACT stands for. – Emily Moss, Volunteer*



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# Theatre Traditions

## *The Little Rituals That Hold Us Together*

Michelle Swink

Community theatre is full of big moments: opening nights, standing ovations, closing night tears, the last screw finally going into the set at 11:58 p.m. But if you ask theatre folks what really makes a place feel like their theatre, many of them will point to something smaller. A circle. A cookie. A brick. A rubber duck.

AACT recently invited theatres across the country to share the rituals, superstitions, and traditions that have become part of their company culture. What stood out most was this: traditions do not have to be fancy or official to matter. Some started as a joke. Some began as a practical way to survive a long tech day. Some are acts of remembrance. Some are good-luck charms. All of them create a shared language, a sense of belonging, and that quiet feeling of “you’re one of us now.”

### Gratitude in a circle

At Soapbox Stageworks in Carmel, California, opening night begins with a simple ritual: everyone gathers in a circle and shares what they are thankful for.

That circle does more than set a tone. Soapbox Stageworks often presents multiple plays in a single performance, which

can make the company feel a little split by casts and scenes. The opening-night gratitude circle pulls everyone back into one shared heartbeat before the curtain goes up.

### Pajamas, potluck, and surviving wet tech

Some traditions exist because tech week is...tech week.

At Theatre Winter Haven in Florida, “Tech Sunday” comes with a rule: PJs and Potluck. Everyone brings food, there’s a snack table you can graze from all day, and a dinner table you do not touch until dinner break. Cast and crew are encouraged to wear pajamas (with a few safety guidelines, including closed shoes and avoiding white because of lighting).

What started with one music director showing up in pajamas turned into a comfort-meets-camaraderie tradition that has lasted 15+ years. And honestly, it makes perfect sense: when the work is intense, the best rituals are the ones that make people feel human again.



Brick with “Do Not Remove” added by the cast (Andria Theatre)

### The brick that won’t be replaced

At Andria Theatre in Alexandria, Minnesota, there’s a brick sitting on a shelf by the stage door.

Before their first stage entrance, cast members touch the brick for good luck. The tradition began when a group of student participants gave the brick a personality (including, at one point, a mustache). Over time, it became a show-by-show rite of passage. Staff even tried to replace it, but the cast searched the building, found the brick, and returned it to its rightful place.

There is now an understood rule: production staff do not move the brick. People will notice. People will revolt.

For Andria, the brick has become more than a superstition. It represents continuity. Hundreds of hands, thousands

*Continued on page 32* ▷

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## Theatre Traditions *continued from page 30*

of touches, and the feeling that every new cast is joining something that existed before them and will exist after them.

### Outdoor theatre and unexpected castmates

If you do theatre outside, nature is part of the company. At Oak Grove Theater in Verona, Virginia, that sometimes means a toad decides to join the show.



*Dr. Coggins (aka Dr. Froggins) a resident toad at Oak Grove Theater*

Their tradition is beautifully specific: if an animal or reptile becomes a recurring stage presence, it must be named after a character who is often referenced in the play, but never seen.

It started at least 30 years ago, and has endured because it turns an unpredictable element into shared joy. It also comes with an unspoken code: no one harms the creatures, and nobody throws food into the woods, unless you want “unwanted friends” like skunks.

One recent season had a toad who kept returning whenever a certain actor was on stage. The toad’s persistence became a story the whole company now shares.

### The cookie that connects a whole room

At Pier One Theatre in Homer, Alaska, the tradition happens in the house, before the show even begins. A representative of the theatre gives a short pre-show welcome, and then does something special: they give a cookie to the person who traveled the farthest to attend the show.

This tradition started when their warehouse theatre on the Homer Spit opened in 1986, as a way to support a young

baker’s new business. But over time it became something bigger: a moment that breaks the ice, turns strangers into a temporary community, and reminds everyone that theatre brings people together across distances.

There’s even a “statute of limitations” on who counts as a visitor, thanks to a long-time local affectionately known as “English John,” whose accent sometimes convinces tourists he should win. His ongoing attempts to claim the cookie have become their own comedic subplot in the tradition.

For Jennifer Norton, who grew up in the theatre, tasting the original baker’s cookie again years later brought back a rush of childhood and community. And when she stepped into leadership herself, the first time she gave away the cookie felt like a rite of passage.

*Read about more theatre traditions in our next issue of Spotlight including ghost lights, ghosts, a mouse named Purl and a duck that could cause a riot.*



*Youth Theatre student Lenore Jones giving away the cookie before Treasure Island at Pier One Theatre*



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## NEWS FROM REGION VI

## REGIONALLY SPEAKING

Justin Pike

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. Justin Allen Pike serves as Representative for Region VI (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas).

Region VI is busy solidifying participation across our region with events throughout the spring. We are excited by the work each state is doing to promote AACT and strengthen community theatre—one local arts landscape at a time.

Texas hosted its annual TEXFest March 12–15 in Odessa. TEXFest featured performances, workshops, and roundtable discussions by the state's community theatres, as well as a design competition and live auction. Registration for the festival was open to anyone who wished to participate, regardless of state or region; however, TEXFest offered special rates for members of the Theatre Network of Texas. The 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Theatre Network of Texas Youth Conference is set for June, in Paris, Texas.

The Oklahoma Community Theatre Association (OCTA) held its annual youth conference in Oklahoma City, March 19–21. The conference was open to students ages 12 through high school seniors, and offered fantastic classes in a variety of theatre disciplines by Oklahoma-based artists.

Carlsbad, New Mexico, served as the backdrop for the Southwest Theatre Conference (SWTC) this spring. After reduced participation in New Mexico over the past few years, it was exciting to see revived interest in the annual conference for the second consecutive year. Located near one of the nation's most popular national parks, Carlsbad Caverns, the festival was hosted at the Carlsbad High School Performing Arts Center. The festival, held April 10–12, featured performances, workshops, and networking opportunities. SWTC included exhibition performances from Region VI theatre companies (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) following AACTFest protocol.

We are excited by all that is happening in Region VI over the coming months, and are already preparing for next year's AACTFest cycle!

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## Katy Merriman & Ben Grimes

Lou Ursone

### Katy Merriman

Indoor hoops in the dead of winter keep Des Moines Playhouse Artistic Director Katy Merriman on her toes. Being a mom of active eight-year-old athlete, Jack, Katy enjoys those moments away from the hectic Playhouse schedule.

Her first youthful experience on stage was wearing a mustache as part of The Munchkin Mayor's gang in *The Wizard of Oz*—and she stayed! Her college years saw her focus on vocal performance at Butler University in Indiana, followed by a master's degree in opera. Prior to her landing in Iowa in 2013, Katy appeared as a concert soloist with the Indianapolis Men's Chorus, the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir, and a chorus member with the Indianapolis Opera. She also served as interim managing director for Summer Stock Stage during her time in Indianapolis. Since moving to Des Moines, she has performed numerous roles on stage with local theatres and directed many productions for the Des Moines Playhouse.

What's the best part of being involved with AACT? Katy said,



Katy Merriman

"I definitely think it's the networking and meeting other people who work in the same industry that I do. We're all spread out, so it's cool to meet people from other regions. Our jobs can be a little isolating—there's not a ton of people in any given city that are the artistic director of a large community theatre."

She also points to "being able to come together for things like the National Directors Conference and the national festival (AACTFest). I've met peers and mentors—learned a lot of tricks of how to survive. It's great to be able to share stories—to give and get advice, too," she added.

"The National Directors Conference—I love it so much," Katy said. "I went to my first one when I was newly hired. The first few times, there was just so much to learn—so many things that were thought-provoking. The longer you go, you start to switch into someone who people start to ask questions of. I get very different things out of it now, but it's still a really nice opportunity to [find out] things that are happening in all theatres. Talking to people who really get what you're up against in your job is amazing."

Speaking of AACTFest, which next takes place in 2027, Katy said, "Go! Even if you don't have a full grasp of what you're signing up for, once you experience it—go and participate in everything, every workshop—you'll always come away with something that will have made it worth your time. You will have met many people (from all over) that you'll be able to work with the rest of your career. The earlier in your career that you can go, the better," she added.

"Organizationally, when you're a small, all volunteer-run theatre, you don't want to write the handbook for everything—create job descriptions, etc. AACT has those resources already put together for anyone to use who is a member," Katy noted. "Plus, you get crazy good discounts on things like show licenses, Sherwin Williams, etc."

Katy's time at the Playhouse started the same year her son was born. Though a performer at heart, between work and family time, she hasn't been on stage as much as she would like. "I really miss performing—it's really hard to work into my schedule as an artistic director who directs a lot, but I did get to do *Once*, a few years ago—that was really special," Katy said.

Why be a member of AACT? "At the end of the day, the networking and what you can learn from other people who do what you do is the greatest value that comes from AACT membership," Katy said.

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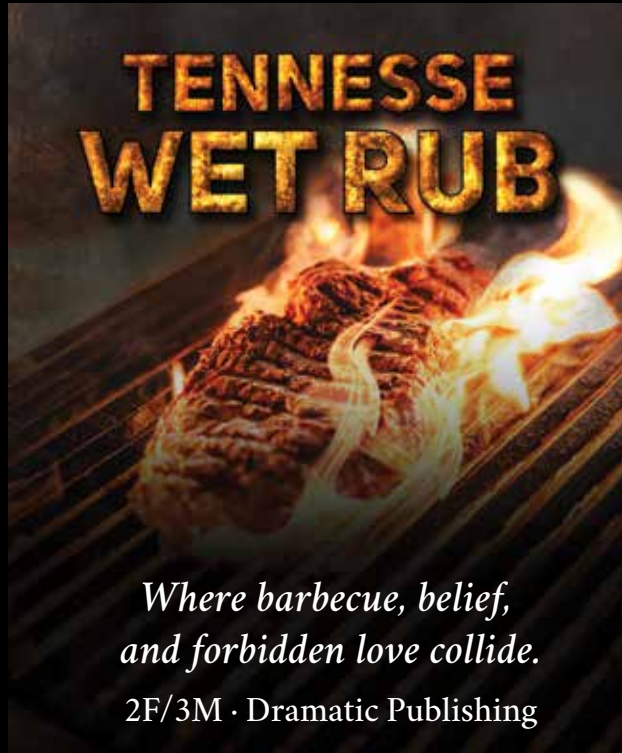


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Continued on page 36 ▷

# *Four Contemporary Plays for Companies Willing to Go There*

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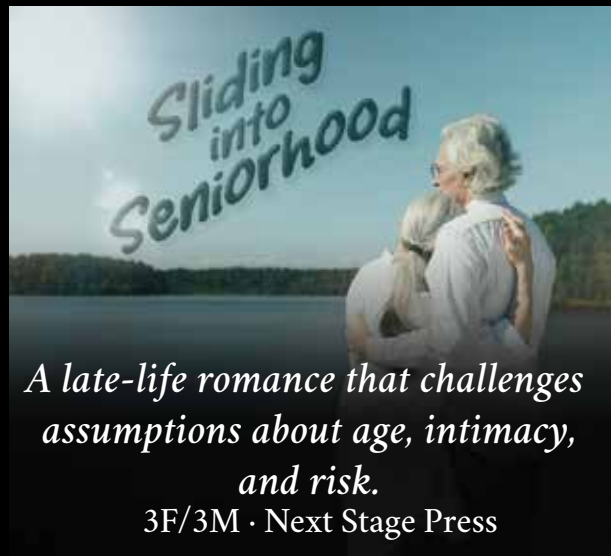


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AACT Advantage *continued from page 34*

## Ben Grimes

For those in the trenches of running a community theatre operation, fighting the battle of rising royalty costs, utilities, fundraising, and more, can be daunting. So we can easily lose sight of what theatre can really do, besides just entertain.

However, for US Army veteran and long-time professional actor Benjamin Grimes, based in Arkansas, theatre provided a much-needed means of healing from combat stress. Grimes served over 10 years as an Airborne Infantryman in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, deploying to Baghdad, Iraq, and again in 2017.

This father of two has had two fairly constant things in his life: theatre and the military.

“I was a military brat, moving regularly for my father’s career in the Air Force,” he says. “But I consider Little Rock my home, since that’s where I graduated high school,” Grimes said. That high school was a performing arts magnet school, which led him to a conservatory college program and eventually, a career as a professional actor.

After more than a decade on stage, Grimes was feeling disconnected and lost. “My acting career was going so well that I joined the



Ben Grimes

army,” he joked. Following his deployment, he returned to theatre and eventually went back to school for a Master’s degree in public service from the Clinton School of Public Service.

Along the way, he founded Riverside Actors Theatre, an Arkansas theatre dedicated to serving veterans. He also served about four years as the finance and administration director at Arkansas Repertory Theatre. Now Grimes is at the helm of The Market House Theatre in Paducah, Kentucky—a multi-million-dollar operation.

Having only learned about AACT after beginning his new job, Grimes said, “I have been just overwhelmed with the mentorship and knowledge base that AACT has. If you have a problem as a theatre manager/director, AACT probably has somebody that has been through that problem and has a good solution. There’s such a wealth of experience and knowledge and community that we have access to. It’s incredible.”

Grimes and his staff take part regularly in AACT’s educational offerings. They participate in the roundtables and webinars to stay current with trends and glean as much as they can from others. “Coming in blind, I wish I had known about AACT sooner,” Grimes said, noting that the National Directors Conference was his first exposure to AACT. “That was an incredible experience,” he added.

“It was really great to sit in a room with community theatres of all different sizes,” he said of the biennial conference. “We’re programming year-round and it’s a lot about deconfliction—how to spin a bunch of plates at the same time,” he said. Grimes added, “AACT is a great resource that professional theatres don’t have.”

“Coming into such a robust organization can be very daunting, but what AACT has helped me understand is how the organization was built. I’m always checking back with AACT for a sanity check, asking others ‘what do you think?’” he noted.

How else has AACT helped his theatre? “Organizationally, we’re in this small community that is Paducah, so it’s easy to get wrapped up in our own problems/struggles,” Grimes said. “AACT reminds us to look at other sister companies that are out there and see how they’re tackling problems—the things that we face are not unique. We’re all dealing with the same questions: how do you plan a season? How do you market it? AACT provides a great way for our staff to communicate and collaborate with others outside of our community.”

Grimes believes that the most compelling reason to be involved with AACT is the people: “It’s all about the people—the connections—that wealth of knowledge that’s out there. From long-time theatre leaders to this new group of directors coming in, it sure is nice to know that you’re not alone.”



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.



*“Seven Drops of Fantasy”*

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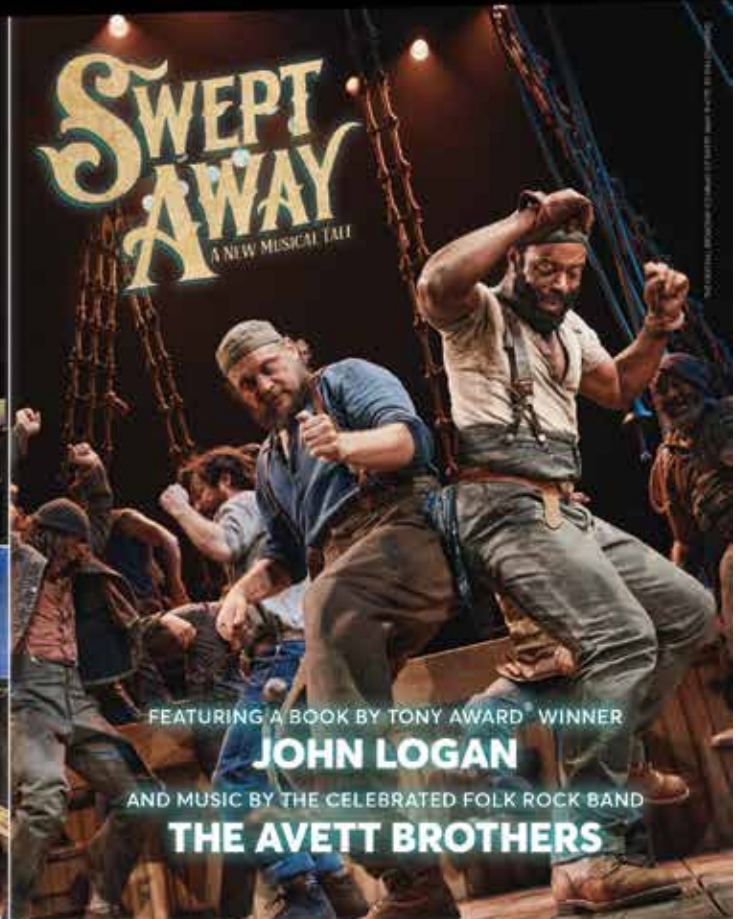
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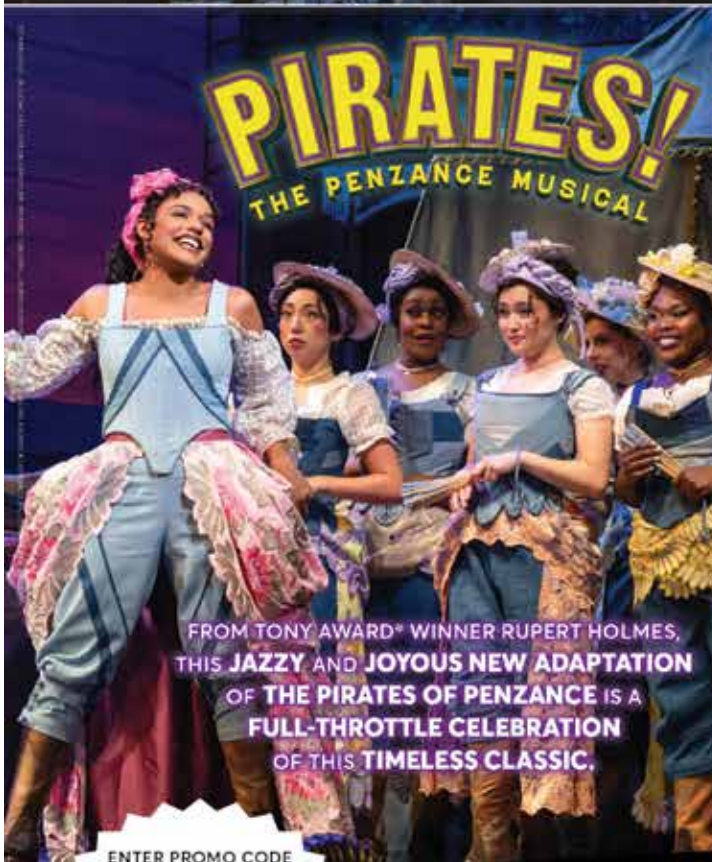
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## The Growing Movement to Prescribe the Arts

Lou Ursone

For years, the *Reader's Digest* has told us that laughter is the best medicine. While the concept of boosting mental health has been around for centuries, over the past several years, scientific research has proven this theory. In the United States, SocialRx (formerly known as Art Pharmacy) is at the forefront of expanding on this.

### The Prescription: Connection Through Creativity

SocialRx was founded in 2022 to address the dual mental health and loneliness crises by connecting members with non-clinical, community-based activities with protective and therapeutic benefits. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, SocialRx is currently working with partners in Arizona, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, and Wisconsin, with hopes of expanding offerings to all 50 states.

As a young adult, Chris Appleton, SocialRx Founder & Chief Executive Officer, struggled with his mental health and emotional well-being—a breaking point that led him toward sobriety at 19. Along the way, he found that the healing power of the arts became a key part of his long-term recovery. Today, Appleton has turned that personal experience into a research-based approach to supporting mental health for those of all ages.

**“The Georgia legislature was the first in the country to pass a resolution that recognizes the impact of arts on mental health.”**

Art and culture, Appleton said, “[have] been available in our communities since the beginning of humankind. We are in the business of connecting that work to systems so that more people can get access.” This ties together the health care system and the arts community and drives new audiences toward the latter.

Participants from ages 10 to 82 are among the program’s beneficiaries. SocialRx serves nearly equal numbers of patients aged 10–26 and adults in the Medicare age range. The middle adult general age range is growing, however, as SocialRx is supporting more types of chronic disease pathways.

The concept is simple: healthcare providers prescribe arts activities to patients as a means of supporting their overall well-being, combatting issues like those resulting from social isolation and loneliness. Research has shown this is an effective way to support patients with mental health needs and promote adherence to treatment plans that manage two or more coexisting health conditions simultaneously.

### A Movement Gaining Momentum

SocialRx is not alone in the field: Social Prescribing USA is a national advocacy organization committed to the belief that health is not only the absence of disease, but the ability to explore, enjoy, and belong to our communities. They are champions of social prescribing and believe deeply in the health professional’s duty to treat not only a patient’s immediate symptoms, but to facilitate the patient’s wellbeing in their broader environment.

Dozens of US Veterans Administration facilities are also involved across the country. Much like the SocialRx model, through their Compassionate Contact Corps (a non-clinical program), a trained volunteer, preferably from the community, is matched with a Veteran who

has been identified by their clinician as potentially benefiting from additional social connections.

Why is this so important? According to the American Society on Aging, one in three Americans experience chronic loneliness. Six in ten Americans have at least one chronic disease, while four in ten have at least two. Fifty percent of U.S. adults will also be diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their lifetime.

Adrienne Hundley, Head of Community Strategy at SocialRx, is enthusiastic about where this is going and said, “The social prescribing field is in a place of really great momentum. There are tons of conversations, convenings, workshops, and summits that are taking place truly across the country. Our partners are seeing outstanding outcomes for their members, like those noted here.” (See chart below)

The concept of social prescribing has been easier to implement in other countries, due to their socialized /universal health programs. In the United Kingdom, for example, social prescribing has been part of the National Health System since the 1990s. Across the European Union, a five-year, eight-country program called SP-EU began in January 2025. According to its website, SP-EU will enable healthcare systems to implement social prescribing as a scalable, safe, cost-effective, and people-centered solution to provide equal access to sustainable care. Thus, SP-EU will enable European health care systems to become equitable, community-based, people-centered and integrated health care.

**BENEFITS / RESULTS OF SOCIAL PRESCRIBING**

- Reduced Loneliness:** 67% of members experiencing loneliness at intake reported decreased loneliness post-dose, as measured by the UCLA-3 Loneliness Scale
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- Provider Satisfaction:** 94% of members would recommend their healthcare provider to others because of SocialRX after completing their prescription
- Satisfaction with SocialRX and their community partners:** Member rate their overall satisfaction with Social RX, on average, a 9 out of 10.

### Making the Case for Arts in Health Care

“The Georgia legislature was the first in the country to pass a resolution that recognizes the impact of arts on mental health,” Hundley said, “and that was just this January. But that’s just the first step towards legislative recognition that can be used by Medicaid and Medicare to really integrate, require, and recognize arts as a piece of health care.”

State by state, and eventually nationally, funding support will continue to develop and expand. Recently, Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield has partnered with the New Jersey Performing Arts Center to

address high-utilizing patients and hopefully to curb costs. Based on their initial success, they received a \$150,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Elizabeth Shapiro, Director of Arts, Preservation, and Museums in the State of Connecticut's Department of Economic and Community Development is another huge supporter of SocialRx. She is proud of where her state is in the process of bringing these programs online. Shapiro also serves on the Advisory Council for Connecticut Collaborative to End Loneliness, a perfect tie-in to SocialRx.

Shapiro learned about SocialRx through Michael Bobbitt, former Executive Director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

"My goal for the arts is always to figure out how to make a case for the critical nature of the arts as a component in solving a whole lot of different problems that are confronting our world today, and particularly our world in Connecticut," Shapiro said. During the pandemic, Shapiro learned of the work being done at the Center for Arts in

Medicine at the University of Florida, who are the preeminent leaders of the clinical connection of arts and wellness. "That's when I first became aware that people were actually doing scientific research about the intersection of arts and health," she added.

### An Old Idea with New Evidence

So, how long have we thought about the arts and healing? More than 300 years ago, William Congreve's 1697 play, *The Mourning Bride*, introduced his oft-quoted phrase "Music has charms to soothe a savage breast," which roughly means that music has the power to calm even the most violent moods.

There is so much more to learn about social prescribing, so I'll be continuing this series with more details over the next few issues in *Spotlight*.



# Crossword

Lynn Nelson

### Across

- 1. Written text of a play
- 7. Informal greeting
- 10. Tempo
- 14. \_\_\_\_\_Q
- 15. United Soccer League, for short
- 16. Prestigious English boarding school
- 17. Irritated, as on one's nerves
- 18. Do what the director says!
- 20. Birthdate, for short
- 21. Irish dagger
- 22. Pell Grant Index
- 23. Greek letter after chi
- 25. Not now
- 27. Hip-related, in medical terms
- 29. Extremely long time period
- 30. Khayyam and Bradley, for two
- 31. Sacred, to Pierre
- 32. Intense anger
- 34. Uncle Sam's revenue collectors
- 35. Central European Time
- 36. Steal the spotlight
- 38. Stylishly handsome
- 42. Number before dos
- 43. Search and rescue (abbr.)
- 44. Chemical compound
- 45. Greeting opener
- 48. Front of the stage
- 50. Former French coin
- 51. Yellowish-brown pigment
- 52. Cunning deceit
- 53. Heart monitor readout
- 54. Adverb before "bien" or "malo"
- 55. Baby oak tree
- 57. Part of a clock's sound

- 59. Lighting cue between scenes
- 61. Stage configuration that might make a third grader giggle
- 64. Sloped walkway
- 65. Consumed food
- 66. Funeral vehicle
- 67. Great Lake
- 68. Container cover
- 69. What's My Line panelist Francis

### Down

- 1. Droop down
- 2. Airplane black box acronym
- 3. Meter measurements
- 4. "I'm not that you"
- 5. Southwestern adobe dwelling
- 6. \_\_\_\_\_ Lasso
- 7. Gullible folks
- 8. Theater staff who help with seating
- 9. "Not guilty," e.g.
- 10. Household animal
- 11. \_\_\_\_\_ dermatitis: eczema
- 12. Woman on the prowl
- 13. Lure or tempt
- 19. Licorice-flavored seeds
- 21. Gaze fixedly
- 23. Lima's country
- 24. Daytime TV offering
- 26. Spanish friend
- 28. Wood-turning tool
- 33. Musical practice piece
- 35. \_\_\_\_\_ Burnett
- 37. Hooded jacket
- 38. Teen idol: Bobby
- 39. Lacking confidence
- 40. Cozy corner

## Let's Play!

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			
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36				37			38				39	40	41
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45	46	47				48			49		50		
51						52					53		
54				55	56				57	58			
59			60						61			62	63
64						65				66			
67						68				69			

- 41. Sound of liquid pouring
- 43. Gushed out
- 45. Title of a 1967 Paul Newman western
- 46. Related to the eye
- 47. Philosophical query
- 48. Rodent in "Spelling Bee"
- 49. Region down below
- 56. Black fossil fuel
- 58. Spoken, not written
- 60. Units educators collect from workshops
- 61. Hip-hop spelling of a definite article
- 62. Identity theft target, for short
- 63. Starting point on the links



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 are available online: [aact.org/puzzle](http://aact.org/puzzle)

## NEW ROLES

### Joanna Sheehan Bell



Joanna Sheehan Bell joins the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) as Executive Director. Most recently, she served as the inaugural Arts and Culture Director for the City of Fayetteville, Arkansas, where she led cultural planning and implementation, and advanced public-facing arts initiatives through cross-departmental and community partnerships.

Previously, Joanna was the first Director of Marketing and Communications for Fayetteville's TheatreSquared, supporting significant audience growth during a capital campaign and helping to elevate the company's national profile. Earlier in her career, she spent 10 years with the American Theatre Wing (founder of the Tony Awards), overseeing a broad portfolio, including grants and awards, professional development initiatives, Emmy-nominated media work, and national partnerships.

Joanna holds an M.A. in Arts Administration from Columbia University and a B.A. from James Madison University. Her brief memoir of life so far appeared in *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure* (Harper Perennial). She currently lives in Fayetteville with her husband, two sons, "one nervous dachshund, and a tailless, one-eyed cat."

### Megan K. Pence



The Board of Directors of Lakeshore Players Theatre in White Bear Lake, Minnesota has announced the promotion of Megan K. Pence to Executive Director. Megan has served as the organization's Managing Director since August 2021, during which time she has been instrumental in transforming Lakeshore Players into a thriving regional performing arts center.

Under Megan's leadership, Lakeshore Players has achieved remarkable milestones. Most notably, she created and executed comprehensive marketing and development plans that brought the organization from a six-figure deficit to a balanced budget for the first time in seven years—a testament to her strategic vision and unwavering dedication to the theatre's mission. Her innovative operational processes have expanded Lakeshore's reach to include a robust concert series, educational programs, and community partnerships that enrich the entire region.

"I am honored and humbled by this opportunity," said Megan. "Lakeshore Players holds a special place in this community, and I'm excited to continue working with our incredible staff, artists, volunteers, and patrons to create meaningful cultural experiences that inspire, challenge, and unite us all."

*If you are an active member of AACT and would like to list New Roles in your organization in an upcoming issue of Spotlight, please submit your request by sending an email to [info@aacr.org](mailto:info@aacr.org).*



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Stephen Peithman

An effective stage director is the production's creative leader, responsible for interpreting the script and working with designers, cast and crew, to bring a unified artistic vision to life on stage.

That may sound like a tall order, but whether you're an experienced director or just beginning, you'll find guidance, ideas and inspiration below. (For online resources, we've provided short links that take you directly to the topic-specific page.)

## Online

- **AACT Resource Library.** Under "Acting & Directing," you'll find "Directing Theater 101," "Script Analysis Worksheet for Production Elements" (Excel), "Audition the Actor, Not the Part," "Casting Tips from Fellow Directors," "Script Changes: How to Make Them Legally," "Staging the Curtain Call," "Directing Basics for Musical Theatre," "10 Common Problems for the Theatre Director (and how to get past them)," and more. (You must be signed in to view.) [aact.org/directing01](https://aact.org/directing01)
- **American Theatre** offers a series of free podcasts, including: "Offscript: The Director's Path," "Developing a Sense of Direction," and "Paving the Way." To listen, click on the podcast title or the adjacent photo/graphic. [aact.org/directing02](https://aact.org/directing02)
- **Deconstructing Directing.** Created in 2024 by theatre artist Andrew Roblyer, this site offers a library of 30-plus videos that can be viewed after creating a free account. Accompanying each video is a PDF transcript and audio-only version. Topics reflect Roblyer's F.L.A.M.E. Paradigm (Facilitator, Leader, Artist, Manager, Educator/Mentor)—and include "Defining Directing" (six lessons), "Our Directing Identity" (seven lessons), "Directing With Kindness" (eight lessons), and "Text, Playwrights, and Dramaturgy" (eight lessons). The site also lists a number of online training and networking programs. [aact.org/directing03](https://aact.org/directing03)
- **The Director's Blog.** Focusing primarily on theatre education programs for young people, articles on this British website (The Artz Centre) include: "10 Problems for a Theatre Director," "Seven Tips for Delivering Theatre Sessions to Young People," and "Time, Energy and Focus." [aact.org/directing04](https://aact.org/directing04)
- **Director's Chair.** Part of the StageMilk site, this section provides a number of candid and informative interviews with leading theatre directors from Australia. [aact.org/directing05](https://aact.org/directing05)
- **Mastering the Art of Theater Directing.** The website of the New International Performing Arts Institute (NIPAI) serves both beginning and experienced directors.



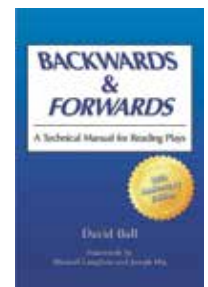
- For beginning directors, there are articles on essential skills, acting and movement theories, and stage composition. [aact.org/directing06](https://aact.org/directing06)
- For directors with more experience, articles include "Beyond the Script: Five Key Directing Tools," "5 Physical Theatre Techniques That Will Improve Your Directing," "Ensemble and Group Dynamics," and more. [aact.org/directing07](https://aact.org/directing07)

- **Mastering Theatre Craft.** Provided by Captitles, an app for creating theatre subtitles, this site includes articles on script analysis, pacing and rhythm, collaborating with designers, auditioning actors, the rehearsal process, and more. [aact.org/directing08](https://aact.org/directing08)
- **Old Vic Theatre.** The London-based theatre's website includes an Independent Learning section with free beginning and intermediate workshops you can complete at your own pace. There are introductory videos for each workshop, but the sessions themselves are text-based. The site also offers articles, interviews, tips, exercises, and behind-the-scenes insights. [aact.org/directing09](https://aact.org/directing09)
- **StageAgent.** Targeted at new directors, this blog covers choosing plays or musicals to produce, directing children, the role of the assistant director, intimacy onstage, theatre games and warm-ups, directing new works, and finding work in theatre. [aact.org/directing10](https://aact.org/directing10)
- **StageTalk.** Here you'll find in-depth interviews with directors, actors, and playwrights from all over the globe, including director Sally Cookson on her latest project, *David Copperfield: A Life*, and Stephen Daldry on reviving his 1994 Tony Award-winning production of J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. [aact.org/directing11](https://aact.org/directing11)

## Books

Online resources are convenient, especially for beginners eager to learn the basics of directing. However, for those wanting to delve more deeply into the craft, books may be a better option. You can progress at your own speed, marking those points that you find most interesting or helpful. You also can return whenever you need a refresher—or fresh inspiration. Below are titles that community theatre directors tell us they've found useful.

- ***Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays***, by David Ball. (Southern Illinois University Press). This classic book's title refers to Ball's system of starting at the end of a play and then working back to the beginning. The idea is to help a director or actor fully understand the arc of the play, with opportunities to investigate plot, character, theme, exposition, imagery, conflict, theatricality, and more.



Continued on page 42 ▷

Resource Center continued from page 41

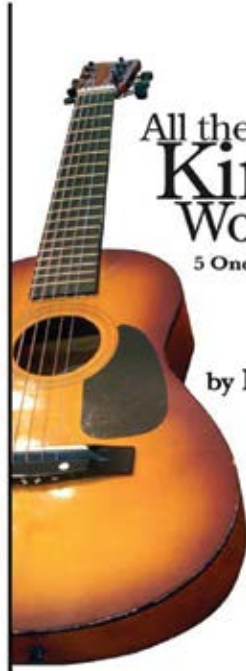
- **Directing in Musical Theatre**, by Joe Deer (Routledge). Topics include analyzing the script; collaborating with the music director, choreographer and designers; running auditions and rehearsals; coaching performers; and more. Deer also shows how to apply each chapter's ideas to an actual musical, using examples like *Big River* and *The Drowsy Chaperone*.
- **Directing Theater 101: 10 Steps to Successful Productions for New Directors and Regional Theater Companies**, by Wilma Marcus Chandler (Smith & Kraus). With beginners in mind, Chandler breaks down directing into 10 key steps, offering an overview on everything from holding auditions and working with cast/crew, to budgets, royalties, and publicity.
- **The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre**, by Katie Mitchell (Routledge). Mitchell, best known for her work in the U.K., explains tools she uses to approach her work with actors, production teams, and the text itself. Of special note are chapters on identifying the ideas that underpin a play's text, her "12 Twelve Golden Rules" for working with actors, and how to analyze your work after a run has ended.
- **The Director's Toolkit**, by Robin Schraft (Focal Press). This comprehensive guide discusses each step of the directorial process in detail, including the selection and analysis of the

script, auditions, casting, character development, rehearsals, and pretty much everything in between.

- **The Empty Space**, by Peter Brook (Scribner). Another classic, this embodies Brook's belief in theatre as "deadly, holy, rough, and immediate." Throughout, he challenges conventional thinking and helps the reader gain a deeper understanding of the director's role in creating meaningful performances.
- **A Sense of Direction: Some Observations on the Art of Directing**, by William Ball (Drama Publishers). Founder of the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, Ball provides a candid, personal account of his method of working, including the choice of a play, preproduction homework, casting, and rehearsal techniques. Now out of print, used copies can be found online—and are worth searching for.
- **Thinking Like a Director: A Practical Handbook**, by Michael Bloom (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux). The key to effective directing, Bloom believes, is the ability to focus on both the external elements of a play's structure *and* the internal lives of its characters. Doing so, he explains, combines the art of dramatic interpretation and the craft of working with actors into a single, unified method.
- **archive.org**. If you're comfortable with reading a book online, here you'll find over 40 classic titles that can be "borrowed" (viewed) with a free account. Basic directorial concepts and approaches haven't changed much in the last 50 years, so older books like these still have much to offer. [aact.org/directing12](http://aact.org/directing12)



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## Hands-on

- Beginners may want to check their local community college or university for courses and programs in stage directing. While courses are sometimes offered online, look instead for in-person classes and directing labs that can help you develop strong directorial and communication skills.
- A good way to get your feet wet is by working first as an assistant director (AD) in a community theatre. ADs support the lead director, facilitate rehearsals, take notes, and often act as a liaison between the creative team and production departments. You'll learn a lot about directing, including where your strengths lie—and where you may need further development.



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.



# Insurance Insights

## Don't Let Cybercriminals Take Center Stage

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

Community theatres rely on digital tools for ticketing, donor management, email, and payroll. These systems store sensitive information, which attracts cybercriminals. A cyber incident can disrupt performances, strain finances, and undermine trust — but with awareness, practical safeguards, and appropriate insurance protection, you can take steps to help reduce risk.

### Top cyber risks facing community theatres today

Many cyber incidents begin with phishing or social engineering, where a single click on a malicious email can give attackers access to a theatre's systems. These attacks may lead to stolen credentials, redirected payments, hidden system access, or the deployment of ransomware. Ransomware can be especially disruptive, locking theatres out of critical systems and halting ticket sales, disrupting production schedules, freezing donor communications, and causing revenue losses from cancelled or delayed performances.

Additional risks include business email compromise, in which attackers impersonate staff or vendors to divert funds, and third-party vendor breaches that can expose a theatre's data even when internal systems remain secure. Unauthorized access to patron, donor, employee, or volunteer information can also trigger public-notification requirements, regulatory scrutiny, legal liability, and reputational harm.

### Consequences of a cyber incident

For community theatres, a cyber incident can quickly escalate beyond IT issues into financial, operational and reputational challenges. Even brief disruptions can be costly, triggering unplanned expenses such as incident response and forensic investigations, system restoration, legal and regulatory fees, crisis communications, potential ransom payments, and lost ticket revenue during downtime.

Cyber incidents can also erode trust and disrupt core operations. Patrons and donors expect their information to be protected, and a breach can damage long-standing relationships. Operationally, an attack during a production cycle or peak ticket sales period can delay or halt performances. In addition, a theatre could face liability exposure if they are found responsible for failing to safeguard sensitive data, potentially resulting in lawsuits from affected individuals or partners.

### Practical steps to help reduce cyber risk

Improving cybersecurity doesn't require a large budget. Consistent, proactive measures can help reduce exposure.

- **Train staff and volunteers.** Regular training on phishing awareness, password safety, and incident reporting can help make a difference.
- **Use multi-factor authentication (MFA).** Enable MFA on email, ticketing systems, donor databases, financial platforms, and cloud storage to help block credential-based attacks.
- **Keep systems updated.** Automatic updates for operating systems, browsers, ticketing platforms, and security software can help close known vulnerabilities.
- **Strengthen password practices.** Encourage unique passwords, password managers, and limited use of shared logins to every extent possible.
- **Back up data regularly.** Store backups securely and separately. Test restoring your backups at least once a year to ensure they work as expected.
- **Assess your cyber risk.** Identify what data you collect, where it's stored, who can access it, and which systems are essential

to operations.

- **Review vendor security.** Ask third-party providers how they protect data, handle updates, and respond to incidents.
- **Separate guest Wi-Fi from internal systems.** Guest Wi-Fi should be isolated from networks that support ticketing, donor management, point-of-sale (POS) systems, and other business-critical computers.
- **Limit system access based on role.** Ensure staff and volunteers only have access to the systems they need to perform their duties and avoid shared logins wherever possible.
- **Secure point of sale (POS) systems and payment processing.** Use secure POS systems and payment processing, confirming they're set up to meet card payment standards and avoid storing card data.
- **Develop a simple incident response plan.** Document who to contact, how to isolate affected devices, and which systems should be restored first in the event of a cyber incident.
- **Physically secure critical equipment.** Ensure networking equipment, ticketing computers, and POS devices are not accessible to the general public.

### How cyber liability insurance can help

Even strong controls can't eliminate risk entirely. Cyber liability insurance provides critical support when incidents occur, including:

- Incident response and forensic services.
- Ransomware negotiation and coverage (where legally permitted).
- Legal and regulatory assistance.
- Business interruption coverage.
- Data recovery costs.
- Crisis communications support.

For community theatres operating on limited budgets, this coverage can make the difference between a manageable disruption and long-term damage.

### Final curtain call

Community theatres are more digitally connected than ever, making cybersecurity an essential part of operational risk management. With thoughtful safeguards and appropriate cyber liability coverage, you can stay focused on what matters most — telling stories, engaging audiences, and inspiring your communities with confidence.

If you haven't reviewed your cybersecurity practices or insurance coverage recently, now is the time.

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# BROTHERHOOD AND THE BARD

INCLUSIVITY  
IN THEATRE

David A. VanCleave

The heart of community theatre is the community itself—the sense of belonging and the relationships formed. For Shakespeare Behind Bars, that notion of community is even greater—a brotherhood.

In 1992, the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival's Producing Artistic Director, Curt Tofteland, partnered with Bellarmine University's Sociology chair, Dr. Curtis Bergstrand, to add Shakespeare to Dr. Bergstrand's Books Behind Bars program. By 1995, Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB) was established within the psychology department of the Luther Lockett Correctional Complex, a medium/maximum-security state prison.

Now, SBB is one of the longest-running theatre prison programs in the United States, and serves hundreds of incarcerated adults and juveniles in various prisons and detention centers throughout Kentucky and Illinois. Each session culminates in a handful of performances—some just for the other inmates, and others that are open to the public.

But while theatre is traditionally all about the performance, SBB focuses more on the process.

*"...to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" - Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2*

"The most important part of Shakespeare Behind Bars is creating community among men who are looking for a way to trust, communicate, and have a safe place to talk about who they are and what their journey is," explained SBB Kentucky co-facilitator Keith McGill. "Just a place to land and also a place to express yourself artistically, a place to explore who you are through your

character, and being able to talk about what happens when your character is paralleling or mirroring your life and what that means and what that brings up."



SBB's 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex

The emotional extremes of humanity—revenge, rage, shame, and fear—are often at the center of Shakespeare's characters. They're also deeply personal for the incarcerated men inhabiting those characters, often forcing them to reexamine their pasts.

"The beauty of Shakespeare Behind Bars," McGill says, "is if that happens, you have 20 people there to listen to you and help you through it. There are many rehearsals where we may not actually rehearse, and we're absolutely fine with that. We all believe the play is important. They hold themselves accountable, but they're also okay saying 'Okay, we're not going to get to the play today.' Nobody's stranded. Nobody's isolated. It literally is a brotherhood; whatever it is you need, we're here for you."

The program at the Luther Lockett Correctional Complex, which McGill facilitates with Crystian Wiltshire, typically has 25-30 active members at any given time. If the number goes down—generally because men have been transferred out or been released—they bring in other members.

Due to the brotherhood nature of the program, and the trust it requires, new members have to go through current members.

"The first week of every month, we allow visitors in," McGill explains. "They introduce themselves, and the person who brought them talks about why they wanted them to see what we're doing. After a while, if the visitors are interested, they can talk with the person who brought them about sponsoring them to become actual members of the troupe."

Continued on page 46 ▷



*A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex, 2018

**Inclusivity** *continued from page 45*

He adds, “The group is really protective...because it’s really important to them. Sometimes you have to struggle with a role because that role is actually trying to tell you something. It might be telling you that you can be a little overbearing, or maybe you should try to examine your behavior so that you’re not so angry, or whatever it is.”

That self-examination doesn’t just inform the performances; it helps with the readjustment after their release. In the 2005 Philomath Film’s award-winning *Shakespeare Behind Bars* documentary, now-retired Luther Luckett warden Larry Chandler said, “Prison isn’t just locking people up and putting people away. Prison should make a difference. The day they walk in, we should start preparing them for the day they leave.”

Recidivism statistics prove *Shakespeare Behind Bars* does exactly that. The national recidivism rate is around 75% and Kentucky’s recidivism rate is 67%.

Shakespeare Behind Bars’ recidivism rate? 6%.

To learn more about Shakespeare Behind Bars, or to watch Philomath Film’s documentary, visit [shakespearebehindbars.org](http://shakespearebehindbars.org)



*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.*



## CALENDAR

Dates	Event	St	City	Phone	Website
June 15 - 20	aactWORLDFEST	FL	Venice	817-732-3177	<a href="http://venicetheatre.org/international">venicetheatre.org/international</a>
June 19 - 28	AACT NewPlayFest Premiere: <i>The Thomas Hardy Project</i> by Becca Blackmore	NY	Ossining	914-263-4953	<a href="http://wctheater.org">wctheater.org</a>
Jul 31 - Aug 9	AACT NewPlayFest Premiere: <i>Bloody Murder at the Black Dog Tavern</i> by Christopher Hencke	AK	Kenai	907-335-1800	<a href="http://kenaiperformers.org">kenaiperformers.org</a>
Aug 14 - 30	AACT NewPlayFest Premiere: <i>They Must Be Women Now</i> by Nedra Pezold Roberts	NM	Albuquerque	505-247-8600	<a href="http://vortexabq.org">vortexabq.org</a>
Aug 28 - Sep 6	AACT NewPlayFest Premiere: <i>Unabashedly</i> by Mike Teverbaugh	ME	Waterville	207-873-7000	<a href="http://watervillecreates.org">watervillecreates.org</a>

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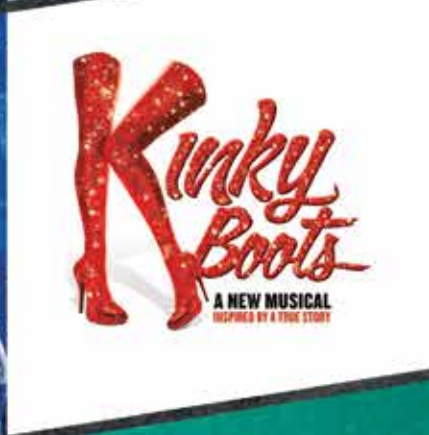
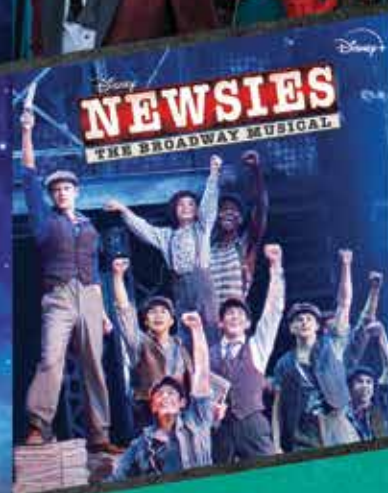
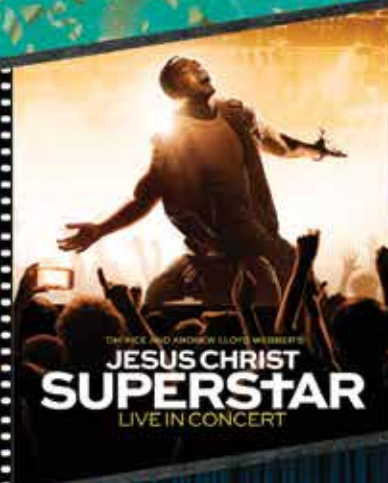
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