



The new role of THEATER IN SPRINGFIELD

THERE'S A FEELING OF MOMENTUM IN THE
DRAMATIC ARTS. NEW COMPANIES ARE STARTING,
NEW THEATERS ARE ATTRACTING PATRONS AND
SEVERAL FACTORS HAVE CREATED THE POSSIBILITY
OF KNOWN ACTORS GRACING A LOCAL STAGE.

Story by SONY HOCKLANDER

A PERFORMANCE of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in June brought a festival atmosphere to Jordan Valley Park, but it alone didn't herald a new era for community theater in Springfield.

After all, Shakespeare has played on community stages for years.

The play was significant in another way: It was the first production in the inaugural season of the Swan Repertory Theatre, a collaboration between Jeff Jenkins of the Skinny Improv Comedy Theatre and Marc Whitmore, a Hollywood agent and manager who is from the Ozarks. Their intention: to produce a season of classic plays with local actors and professional headliners.

Years from now, if the "Swan Rep" becomes a success, theater-goers might look

THEATER PATRONS watch "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in Jordan Valley Park in June. The show was the first production of the Swan Repertory Theatre, a company dedicated to works by classic playwrights.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB LINDER / OZARKS SIGNATURE



back at "A Midsummer Night's Dream" — and 2008 — as the tipping point when Springfield theater seemed to shift up a notch: It's possible local theater may expand to provide more variety and opportunities than ever before.

OFFERINGS KEEP EXPANDING

National touring companies come through Springfield courtesy of Juanita K. Hammons Hall for the Performing Arts.

But community theater productions are primarily directed, performed and run by people who live and work in the Ozarks — or have Ozarks connections.

Springfield Little Theatre at the Landers Theatre and Vandivort Center Theatre, community anchors on Walnut Street,

each serve loyal audiences.

Little Theatre is known for big musical productions and educational programs for young performers. Most shows are family-friendly, though the organization occasionally produces fare better suited for mature audiences.

Vandivort has a reputation for producing edgier shows and contemporary Broadway and off-Broadway plays, although it also produces some family-friendly fare.

Tent Theatre has gone up for 45 summers at Missouri State University, bringing light fare — a mix of musicals and plays.

Big Momma's Coffee & Espresso Bar on Commercial Street is the home of Big

Momma's Back Porch Theatre. This recent addition to the scene puts on smaller, sometimes original plays that are often presented as dinner theater.

The 2nd Stage Performance Theatre company downtown on Campbell Avenue is creating yet another kind of art, described by Jeff as "socially conscious" theater. It's now being managed under the umbrella of the Vandivort.

The Skinny Improv, which Jeff founded in 2002, does more than comedy: The Skinny has produced a children's theater season since 2004 and just launched the Swan Rep.

With so many live theater venues — including the Gillioz Theatre, where one



JEFF
JENKINS



ACTRESSES IN "A Midsummer Night's Dream" perform at Jordan Valley Park. Local actors have been hired for the Swan Repertory's main company, with additional roles to be filled through auditions. The company's creators hope to draw headliner names to Springfield to perform in the shows.

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Swan show will be staged — Jeff says he thinks downtown Springfield should be designated as a "theater-arts district."



SALLY BAIRD

Theatergoer and arts supporter Sally Baird would argue that it already has that distinction.

"I think people from outside of Springfield are almost incredulous about the quality of arts in this town. We've got it going on, and it's good for the whole community," Sally says.



STACY PARKER

Stacy Parker, who directed "A Midsummer Night's Dream," is a professional actress from Chicago. She moved to Springfield last year to teach at Missouri State University. She has been surprised not only by the variety of theater here, but by the enthusiasm of the theatergoers.

"People want to go see arts in this community. It's truly a part of the community experience," Stacy says. "I think the future of American theater is going to be in smaller communities where it is part of the community — where it is not considered a luxury but where (people say), 'This is what we do.'"

'THERE'S ROOM FOR EVERYBODY'

Shirley Maddy, an arts patron, worried about finding live theater when she and her husband, Bill, moved to Springfield decades ago from a big city. She didn't worry for long.

"I think the Landers and the Vandivort have set the goals so high," says Shirley.

Those theaters have had their share of company: Over the years, grass-roots acting groups have come and gone.

"Some stumble and fall, and regroup and come back," says Bucky Bowman. He directs An Arts Patronage Initiative, a private endowment fund that supports arts

in the Ozarks.

But this latest crop feels different somehow from previous attempts. They seem a little more permanent — perhaps because new organizations presenting shows have established their own performance spaces. Big Momma's has its coffeehouse locale, and the Skinny Improv and 2nd Stage are downtown.

"Personally, I think (a variety of options is) critical for keeping a vital theater community going and also for bringing in more and more people to theater appreciation. There's room for everybody," Sally says.

It's important to attract new generations to theater — any kind of theater — Sally says. "You do that through education and by offering things that appeal to a cross-generation."

And it's good for actors, says Beth Do-mann, artistic director at Little Theatre. "It gives people more opportunities. It gives them more choices, more venues to work with, more people. It gives them



DERRICK DEVONE KING (center) portrays Jesus reprimanding his disciples in "Godspell," a 2007 show by Springfield Little Theatre company at the Landers Theatre. The Landers building is a downtown landmark; the Little Theatre is known for musicals with large casts and family-friendly shows.

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CODY MOBLEY (left) and Nathan Shelton act in the Vandivort Center Theatre's production of "The Pillowman," a dark comedy that ran this spring. The Vandivort, a longtime anchor of the dramatic arts in Springfield, tends to put on edgy, contemporary plays.

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"HEROES," a play about African-American heroes, both famous and forgotten, was presented in February at Big Momma's Back Porch Theatre. Cast members (from left) Whitney Pendergrass, Ibiyinka Alao, Gwen Marshall, Nora England, Lyle Foster and Arzo Tureaud portrayed characters such as Josephine Baker and Coretta Scott King. The theater, housed on Commercial Street in Big Momma's Coffee & Espresso Bar, is part of the new generation of Springfield dramatic arts. It is known for dinner shows and original material.

OZARKS SIGNATURE FILE PHOTO



JUSTIN DALTON AND KRISTA RIDLEY read through the program prior to watching "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Stacy Parker, a professional actress and a teacher at Missouri State University, says, "People want to go see arts in this community. It's truly a part of the community experience."

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB LINDER / OZARKS SIGNATURE

more experience."

Jeff thinks the new options make everyone stronger. It's like that saying, he says: Iron sharpens iron. "I think we're all challenging each other."

SWAN REPERTORY COULD ATTRACT BIG NAMES

For a long time, Jeff has wanted to create a repertory company that performed the classic works of playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Molière.

Last fall, Jeff met Marc, who'd recently moved to Strafford. Marc, who grew up in Springfield, has offices in Los Angeles, New York, Nashville, Atlanta and other cities. But, like Jeff, he's wanted to start a classic theater in his hometown. Marc says he's always enjoyed Springfield's community theater, including Tent Theatre at MSU (the school he attended in the 1970s).

Local actors were hired to perform as the

Swan Repertory's main company, with additional roles to be filled through open auditions. Marc and Jeff intend to eventually pursue Actors' Equity Association status for the Swan Rep.

Actors' Equity is a union; earning an Equity card can open doors for actors.

Marc is an Equity member. He has the connections to bring in professional names and plans to call on a few he knows this first year. If the company is a success, he and Jeff hope others will follow.

"Some of the great playwrights have fantastic work that nobody does anymore. So we can keep this going for years and years," Marc says.

Bucky thinks Springfield is ready for the kind of theater Jeff and Marc plan — especially the 30- and 40-something crowd.

"They've grown up expecting a great deal out of entertainment. Unless it's headliners, they are not interested. So

many go to Chicago, Little Rock, Dallas, Tulsa and Kansas City," Bucky says.

Marc considers what he and Jeff are trying to do as another piece of the puzzle that makes up theater as a whole in the area.

"We have a tremendous cultural base in southwest Missouri. It comes from all the universities here. And it comes from the professionals here that are looking for good cultural works."

MSU THEATER SEEKS ELEVATION TO NATIONAL STAGE

Swan Rep may be the newest kid on the block, but Tent Theatre at MSU made a move this summer that might also change the state of Springfield dramatic arts: It became an Equity theater.

That means Tent hired two Equity-card-holding actors and a professional stage manager for each of its shows.

Student actors may now earn points

toward their own Equity cards, putting them a step closer to landing auditions for professional stage shows in cities such as Chicago or New York after they graduate.

Going Equity was a long-range plan for Tent, says Michael Casey, who is artistic director for Tent.

"We were looking for a way to thrust Tent into a more national arena; to give it more weight on (students') resumes," he says.

It's also a way to bring former students, now professional actors, back to MSU.

As today's students get a head start on going professional themselves, the hope is that they too may come back as professionals. It's a cycle that will benefit MSU students, as well as local theater, he says.

"Springfield audiences will benefit from seeing more professional actors on stage," Michael says.

ACTORS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT NEW POSSIBILITIES

Some area actors are happy to see more opportunities that help them stay in Springfield, says Bryan Moses, who has di-

rected two plays at 2nd Stage. He moved back to Springfield from Chicago.

"I moved in the hopes that a professional theater would be started, which is what's great about the Swan happening," says Bryan, who was selected to be in the Swan company.



MICHAEL
CASEY

Actor Nathan Shelton is well-known in Springfield for his community-theater and MSU performances. Nathan is also in the Swan company and he's glad to see another opportunity.

"It's going to be a whole new level of theater that enhances what is already here," says Nathan.

Sara Buffamanti, a New York actress who was in Springfield to play Titania in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," says she likes to see opportunities for nonlocal actors — but she's glad that "artists here are not being shut out — that they have the opportunity to participate."

She's seen local actors cut loose in some communities where she's lived and worked.

"It's exciting to see all that's happening here," she says. "And it seems to be happening at a fairly steady pace."

CAN BOOM BE SUSTAINED?

Theater patron Shirley says she's proud to see the growth, but she worries an explosion of options might result in fewer chairs filled as theatergoers splinter: "I think everybody should have a chance, but we should be careful or we won't have any audience."

Arts supporter Sally shares that worry a little, too: "Do we have the population for that, and not peel it off in too many directions? But in general, I think the more you have, they just cross-pollinate, and the better it is."

Missouri State teacher Stacy thinks growth in Springfield's theater arts will be organically driven. Theaters serving certain niches will survive and thrive if demand dictates that they do.

"I think the arts community will continue to grow in Springfield until people stop wanting to embrace the arts," she says.

Jeff simply hopes there's an audience for classical theater. Most Swan Repertory shows will be at the Skinny Improv's 150-seat theater on Park Central East, so they won't be trying to fill a huge venue.

"If it's good, people are going to come to it," he says. "And it's our job to make it good." ❄

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