



American Association of Community Theatre

Fall 2026 \$5.00

SPOTLIGHT

MAGAZINE

IN THIS ISSUE

AACTFest 2027

aactWORLDVEST

Theatre Harrisburg Centennial

Star Power: Razzle Dazzle 'Em

Theatre Ghost Stories

We Gather to Make Theatre

Survey: Setting the 2027 Stage

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Lou Ursone, AACT President

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Getting started with a new season in September brings back lots of the same emotional responses that going back to school did each year. And while it has been a long time since I was headed to a new school year, the excitement of a new season is just as wonderful, and yet, some of the fears are there, too.

Will we sell more tickets this year? How will we meet our fundraising goals? Will federal or state funds increase or be wiped away? Hopefully, our teams will rise to the occasion as they always do, and, through the resources we share through AACT, we will find new ways to tackle old problems when they arise.

Putting fears aside, AACT has much to be excited about because AACTFest 2027 in Rochester, Minnesota is on the horizon. With 2026 aactWORLDFEST wrapped up (more on that below) we'll be focusing on making it the best festival ever. Some of that focus stems from our recently adopted strategic plan, which includes festivals. So, one of our newly activated board committees will have its eyes on AACTFest and beyond.

The strategic plan is meant to guide us for the next several years, as we take a very broad look at our incredible association and find the best ideas in keeping true to our mission of helping theatres thrive. Some long-held ideas and programs will remain—others reimaged—and some brand-new thinking will emerge for the largest sector of the US theatre industry—community theatre.

And speaking of aactWORLDFEST 2026...

Once again, Venice Theatre hosted and curated an absolutely incredible program of international performances, all while in the midst of rebuilding their main stage, which was significantly damaged by Hurricane Ian in 2022. Not many other organizations would take on such a huge event—handled brilliantly—while forklifts and welders were working nearby toward their February reopening. Special thanks go to Kristofer Geddie and his incredible team.

As I begin my year as President, I am humbled by the work that has been done before me and by what lies ahead... but also very excited. I am extremely grateful for the leadership of our outgoing President, Kristofer Geddie, who I am so glad will be on hand as an ex-officio member of our Executive Committee, along with Allen Ebert, Scot MacDonald, and Kay Armstrong. I know we will have a great year.

For 26 years I have benefitted greatly from this incredible organization... many of those years solely on the receiving end. Since the dark days of 2020, I've dedicated my efforts to giving back to this organization which helped keep my home theatre—and hundreds across the country—connected, supported, and thriving.

We are an amazing theatre family, and I look forward to hearing more about all the creative work being done across the country.



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and inspires you... your input
helps shape every issue.

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aact.org/spotlight-feedback



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On the Cover

The Scrambled Egg Theatre Company (United Kingdom) – Performing Exposure at aactWORLDFEST, Venice Theatre, Venice, Florida. photo: Renee McVety Photography

A

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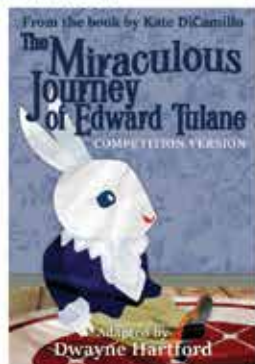
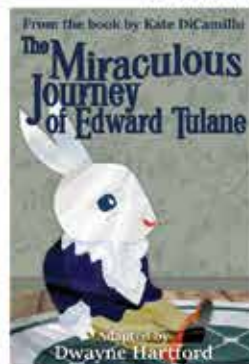
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Upcoming Events

AACTFest 2027, Rochester, Minnesota
June 15–19, 2027
VIP Registration now open
Early-Bird Registration now through March 1
aact.org/aactfest

AACT Executive Committee Meeting
October 28, 2026
Rochester, Minnesota

Community Theatre Management Conference (CTMC)
June 14–16, 2027
Registration now open
aact.org/ctmc

AACTFest National Adjudicator Training (Hybrid)
Virtual Classes held in spring 2027
On-site Adjudications held June 15–19, 2027, in Rochester, Minnesota
Registration opens September 1, 2026
aact.org/aactfest

AACTFest State and Regional Festivals
Dates vary
aact.org/firstfests

For a full listing of upcoming events visit
aact.org/calendar

Watch for new online programming this Fall!

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 for upcoming details and events.



Member Roundtables

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.

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Spotlight Editorial Team: Nicholas Brown, Quiana Clark-Roland, Michael Cochran, Jim Covault, Winston Daniels, Mary Doveton, Kristofer Geddie, Karen Matheny, Lynn Nelson, Stephen Peithman, Katrina Ploof, Michelle Swink, Dorinda Toner, Lou Ursone, David A. VanCleave

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Design and Layout: Jim Covault

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AACTFest 2027

Get Ready for the Ultimate Theatre Celebration!

The spotlight awaits! Experience 12 spectacular mainstage productions featuring an incredible mix of talented community theatre groups from across the country, plus performers from U.S. military bases overseas, and dynamic youth ensembles showcasing the next generation of theatre stars.

But the excitement doesn't stop on stage. Dive into a vibrant lineup of curated exhibits, hands-on workshops, powerhouse speakers, can't-miss networking mixers, and exclusive special events designed to inspire and connect theatre lovers from every corner of the nation.

Location: Mayo Civic Center & Rochester Civic Theatre – Rochester, Minnesota

Dates: June 15–19, 2027

Regional representation is key to this national festival. Curious about how the regional divisions work? Get the full breakdown at aact.org/rebs and start planning your festival experience today!

Lock in the best rate & best seats

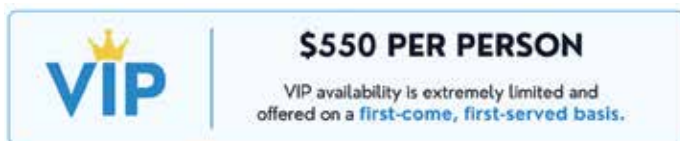
Register by March 1, 2027, to secure Early Bird pricing and ensure your spot in limited-capacity workshops and events. *Don't wait—these savings disappear after March 1.*

Go VIP: The Ultimate Festival Experience

Take your AACTFest experience to the next level. VIP space is extremely limited, so act fast to receive:

- Reserved Seating for all 12 shows (pick your spot in advance).
- All-access pass to shows, workshops, and special events.
- Exclusive Welcome Gift Package.
- Early hotel access (book at the Kahler Grand Hotel before October 1, 2026).
- Invitation to our VIP-only special event.

Questions about group seating or the VIP package? Contact Jill Patchin at jill@aact.org



General Registration: Save Up to 50%

Secure full access to the festival's best offerings at the lowest possible price.

Rate Type	Dates	Member	Non-Member
Early Bird	Sep 1 – Mar 1, 2027	\$400	\$500
Advance	Mar 2 – May 31, 2027	\$450	\$565
Onsite	After Jun 1, 2027	\$500	\$625
Student (18 & under)	Sep 1 – Jun 19, 2027	\$250	N/A
Chaperone	Sep 1 – Jun 19, 2027	\$300	N/A



Festival Add-Ons

Enhance your week with these limited-capacity opportunities:

- Adjudication Training Seminar (Limited to 15) – \$175
- Monologue Competition – \$25
- Saturday Awards Gala (Extra Guest Ticket) – \$65
- Discounts available: Company Registration (\$10 off), Community Theatre Management Conference (\$15 off)

Festival Lodging

Stay in the heart of Rochester by booking your room at The Kahler Grand Hotel. The official festival hotel, the Kahler is offering exclusive discounted rates to attendees, with reservations opening October 1, 2026.

Conveniently situated just 0.4 miles from the Mayo Civic Center and Rochester Civic Theatre (the primary venues for all festival events), the Kahler makes for an effortless commute. On-site dining at the Lord Essex Tavern and Grill showcases inventive twists on traditional American cuisine in a cozy, tavern-style atmosphere. For recreation, guests can take a dip in the indoor rooftop pool or keep up with their fitness regimen in the 24-hour center.

The adjacent Grand Shops at Kahler offer additional retail and dining options just steps away, while the surrounding downtown area boasts a wealth of restaurants, historical sites, cultural landmarks, and scenic natural attractions for visitors to discover.

Discounted Rates (plus applicable taxes):

King or Double/Double – \$155.00/night
Junior Suite – \$155.00/night

Reservations (beginning Oct. 1): aact.org/hotel-travel.

(These special rates are *not* available via the hotel's website or telephone.)

To learn more about the hotel and its amenities, visit thekahlerhotel.com. Your stay at our designated host hotel makes it possible for AACT to provide the great discounts, services, and experiences offered during the festival.

Experience Rochester, Minnesota

Get ready for an electrifying week in Rochester! AACT is thrilled to host our national festival in this culturally vibrant, utterly charming city. Imagine days filled with dazzling performances, inspiring workshops, invaluable connections, and plenty of unforgettable fun. This is the ultimate celebration of community theatre, and you absolutely won't want to miss it!

continued on page 10 ▷

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AACTFest 2027 continued from page 8

And the excitement doesn't end when the curtain falls. Consistently ranked among the best places to live in the U.S., Rochester is just as welcoming to visitors as it is to locals. Home of the world-famous Mayo Clinic, the city is steeped in a culture of compassion, a spirit of innovation, and a fascinating history. This Minnesota gem also offers breathtaking scenic views, a wonderfully relaxing pace, and a thriving scene of dining, shopping, and entertainment. But the real fun? Discovering its hidden adventures, from uncovering secret speakeasies with craft cocktails to exploring unique local hotspots that give the city its one-of-a-kind character.

Ready to discover it all? Dive into everything that Rochester has in store for you at ExperienceRochesterMN.com



Mayo Civic Center

Workshop Call for Proposals

AACTFest 2027 is set for Rochester, Minnesota, June 15–19, 2027, and the AACT Education & Workshops Committees want your help making it the best festival ever.

Is there a subject you want to learn more about? We'd love to hear your suggestions! Email your ideas to AACT Education Director David A. VanCleave at dvancleave@aact.org.

We are also currently accepting proposals and requests for in-person workshops that will inspire and engage all who attend. The deadline to submit is October 21, 2026. In November, applicants may be notified by a member of the Workshop Committee to discuss their proposal and any ideas for clarification, modification, or combination with another session proposal. All applicants will be notified via email by January 4, 2027, as to whether their proposals have been accepted or declined. All session presenters must register for the festival by March 1, 2027.

Possible Topics

Workshops can explore any aspect of theatre, including:

- Accessibility & Inclusion
- Acting
- Administration
- Board Development
- Design/Technology
- Directing
- Education
- Fight / Intimacy Choreography
- Marketing & Outreach
- Movement & Physical Theatre
- Musical Theatre
- Playwriting & Dramaturgy
- Stage Management
- Youth Programming
- ...and other topics you believe will benefit or inspire theatre people.

AACT will not select proposals that attempt to promote or sell a product, company, or service. To learn more about sponsorship, exhibition, and advertising opportunities with AACT, please contact Jill Patchin, Corporate Partners Manager, at jill@aact.org

Helpful Tips

While there is no secret recipe for the perfect workshop proposal, fully realized and well thought-out proposals are preferred. Select a topic you are passionate about, experienced in, and that aligns with AACT's mission to help theatres thrive.

We encourage you to begin by considering the following:

- What do you want participants to walk away with?
- What is your strong guiding question?
- How does your session benefit AACT and its members?

As you plan your proposal, remember:

- *Think Outside the Box!* Unique and specific topics are encouraged. What information do you have that isn't easily accessible for all theatres?
- *Active & Hands-on!* The most well-received workshops allow attendees to learn by doing. Sessions that relay information without active engagement are not as positively rated.
- *Titillating & Truthful Titles!* A clever and creative title plays a significant role in capturing attendees' attention—but only when it accurately reflects what they will experience.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long is an AACTFest workshop?

Workshops are typically 75 minutes in length, though we are sometimes able to accommodate longer sessions. If your session requires more time, please note that in your proposal.

Will presenters receive an honorarium?

As a membership association, AACT does not provide honoraria for general session workshop presenters. While non-members may submit a proposal, all presenters must register for the festival by March 1, 2027. Presenters will receive an early-bird discount.

What equipment will be provided?

A select number of workshop rooms will include a monitor or projector with screen, along with HDMI and USB-C connecting cables. Presenters must provide their own laptop or other source. Any other equipment, materials, or handouts must be provided by the presenter.

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We Make Humans, We Make the World Turn

AACT NewPlayFest: The Thomas Hardy Project by Becca Blackmore

David A. VanCleave

Westchester Collaborative Theater (WCT) in Ossining, New York, is a theatre company dedicated to nurturing new works and voices. Member playwrights, actors, and directors participate in a lab process where, several times a month, new plays are read and critiqued. Even still, there was a palpable energy last June when WCT opened the world premiere of AACT NewPlayFest winner *The Thomas Hardy Project*, by Becca Blackmore.

The Thomas Hardy Project tells the story of Jada and Abigail, two very different high school senior girls, who have been assigned an advanced placement English project. Abigail is convinced she will be the class valedictorian once this final assignment is completed and resents that she has to partner with anyone to write about Thomas Hardy. Jada, a track star who had never been on Abigail's radar, surprises her with her hard work, quick wit, and academic abilities. When a scandal about one of the girls explodes, the girls rage at the parallels between the school's response and the cruelty aimed at women in the novels they're studying, bonding even as they compete for academic acclaim.

Blackmore initially challenged herself to write a two-person play with a unit set, but she ultimately created something from the heart—"a story about women who don't back down from owning their intelligence. Women who are very proud of the fact that they are the smartest people in the rooms that they enter," Blackmore said.

"I feel like we're in a time right now where women are told to take a back seat, where there are women in this country who are saying they would give up their vote and let their husbands vote, count for their household, things like that that are extreme and discouraging," the playwright continued. "And I think it's time for women to step up and say, 'No, we are smart. We are powerful. We make humans, we make the world turn. And you

can't just pretend that we don't because it suits you at different times.'"

WCT's Executive Director, Alan Lutwin remembers, "When we were reading through the finalists, what first drew me to *The Thomas Hardy Project* was that it was such a well-written play. A skillfully drawn character-driven plot that deals with provocative and timely themes. It is also a single set, two-character piece that works well within the confines of our intimate, black box space."



Alicia Holderfield

Jada (Kandy Kapelle) and Abigail (Eva Kottakis) develop a timeline to complete their final AP project before graduation.

As for director Susan Ward, she admits that, "When I first read the play, I thought it would be a real challenge to direct a 74-page play with two teenaged girls as the characters and a single set. How would I make it dynamic?"

Luckily, Ward loves a challenge. "As we began doing character work it soon became obvious that the deeply meaningful plot would carry us along," she continued. "Becca's words are so strong that I often told the actors that they didn't have to work hard to convey the emotion. 'Feel it; don't show it' was my mantra as a director. If they truly felt what they were going through, that would be enough. And it was."

Blackmore agrees: "This has been a fantastic experience. It's so joyous to hear your words and to see the characters come alive in the actors' bodies and the way that they move around the space and to feel a whole audience feeling the story with you. Not just watching it or listening to it, but you can feel other people's tensions at tense moments. You can feel them release a breath when some moment of lightness comes in. You can hear them laugh. And just doing that collectively in theatre is so important in a world where everyone's so isolated now. It's magical to be in a theatre with other people."

"And it's ephemeral and it's joyful and it's moving, and I hope that we never stop doing it."

About WCT

The Westchester Collaborative Theater is dedicated to nurturing new work for the stage. Over 160 member playwrights, actors, and directors participate in a lab process where, several times a month, new plays are read and critiqued. WCT also

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presents two mainstage productions and several play readings each season, developed through their lab process and featuring member actors and production teams. Committed to furthering theatre arts in their community, they are involved in developing youth theatre and outreach to local senior residences and arts organizations. WCT is a proud recipient of production grants from ArtsWestchester and the New York State Council on the Arts.

About Playwright Becca Blackmore



Becca Blackmore is the co-author of the musicals *Quiz Bowl* (formerly *Academia Nuts*) (Best New Musical, NYMF; virtual production at NYFA), *Snow Way Out* (Micro-Musical Theatre Show Podcast; York Theatre Company Developmental Reading Series), *The Peculiar Tale of the Prince of Bohemia* and *the Society of Desperate Victorians* (Goodspeed Festival of New Musicals), *Hatter* (Indiana University; NYU), *Grandma's Last Hurrah*, and *Period Piece* (The Marilyn Monroe Theatre). She is the author of the plays *President Mom* (with Dan Marshall, Beverly Arts Center; Notre Dame College; Caryl Crane Youth Theatre; 'Iolani School), as well as *The Thomas Hardy Project* (Florida Laboratory Theatre). Her works have been finalists or semi-finalists for the Dramatists Guild Foundation National Fellowship, the Kleban Prize, the Princess Grace Awards, the Pittsburgh New Works Festival, and more. Her play *President Mom* won the 2014 Ronald M. Ruble New Play prize and a 2015 Tam & Young Arts Chair

Visiting Artist Residency in Honolulu. Becca is the author of the feature-length screenplay *Church Choir Christmas Party*, three original television pilots, and is co-author of *First Realm Problems* (with Hudson Meredith) and *Department of Ed* (with Dan Marshall). She holds both a BFA and MFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.



Allie Holderfield

Opening Night: From Left: Alan Lutwin (WCT Executive Director), Cliff Lee (Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation), Susan Ward (Director), Kandy Kapelle (Jada), Eva Kottakis (Abigail), Becca Blackmore (Playwright), David A. VanCleave (Dramaturg), Kathy J. Pingel (AACT NewPlayFest Chair), and Linda Habjan (Dramatic Publishing Company's Vice President, Acquisitions) at the world premiere of *The Thomas Hardy Project* at Westchester Collaborative Theater.



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



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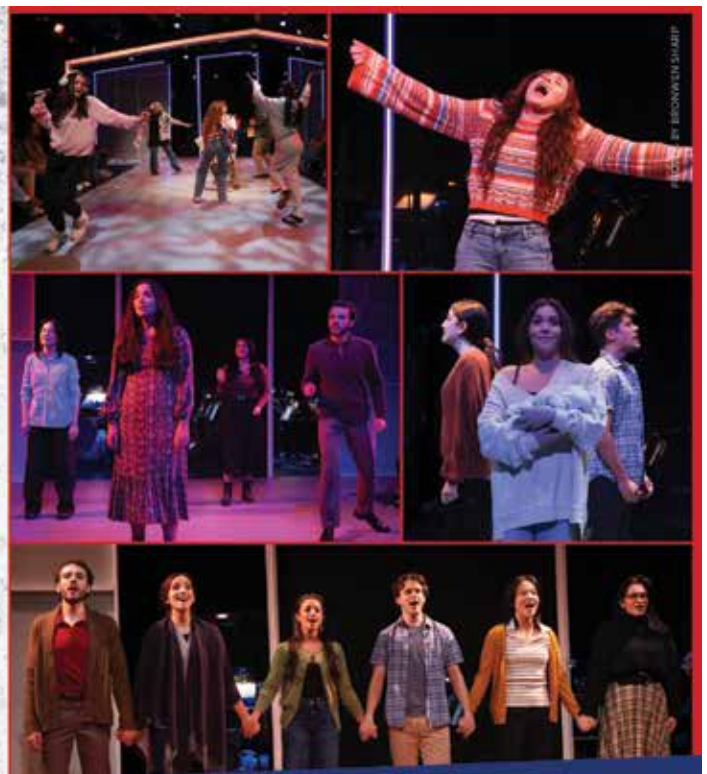
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aactWORLDFEST 2026: More Than a Festival

Connecting Through the Language of Theatre

Michelle Swink

By the end of the week, it was almost impossible to walk through Florida's Venice Theatre without stopping to chat with someone. Friends who hadn't seen each other in years were catching up. First-time attendees were already making plans to stay in touch. Everywhere you looked, people were laughing, swapping stories about their theatres back home, taking photos together, and talking about the performances they had just seen.

That's what makes aactWORLDFEST so special.



AACT staff members Winston Daniels, Quiana Clark-Roland, and Michelle Swink helped welcome participants from around the world during aactWorldFest 2026

Yes, it's a week filled with incredible theatre, but it's also about bringing people together through a shared love of the art form.

This year's festival welcomed companies representing Ghana, the Indian Diaspora, Israel, Italy, Latin American Culture, Poland, Slovakia, Switzerland, the United King-



Several AACT members gathered during the Opening Ceremony

dom, Ukraine/Russia, and U.S. Latino theatre. Every company brought something completely different to the stage. Some productions were funny. Others were emotional. Some relied almost entirely on movement or music instead of dialogue. Several were performed in languages many audience members didn't speak, but that never seemed to matter. The stories still resonated. Audiences laughed together, sat quietly through emotional moments, and responded with enthusiastic applause at the final curtain.



Renee McVeety Photography

A scene from The Sky in a Room performed by Maner Manush from Italy

Of course, the performances were only part of the experience.

Throughout the week, participants had opportunities to attend a variety of workshops, explore different aspects of theatre, and learn from artists with diverse backgrounds and experiences. After each performance, talkbacks gave audiences the chance to hear directly from the artists, ask questions, and learn more about each company's creative process. Those conversations often continued long after the sessions ended, spilling into the lobby, over dinner, and at the evening afterglows.

One of the best parts of aactWORLDFEST is watching those connections happen. You might see someone from Oklahoma chatting with someone from Poland, someone from Switzerland exchanging ideas with someone from Florida, or a first-time attendee sitting down with people they'd only just met. By the end of the week, those introductions had turned into genuine friendships.

This year's festival also reflected the resilience of Venice Theatre. Although the theatre continues rebuilding after Hurricane Ian, the staff and volunteers welcomed guests from around the world with warmth, creativity, and remarkable hospitality. Their hard work behind the scenes helped make every performance, workshop, and event run smoothly throughout the week.



Renee McVeety Photography

AACT Board President Lou Ursone presents the Robert E. Gard Superior Volunteer Award to Jean Trammell of Venice Theatre



Renee McVey Photography

A scene from *Playing God* performed by dNO Company from Slovakia

AACT was also proud to present several national awards during aactWORLDfest, recognizing individuals and organizations whose leadership, volunteerism, and dedication continue to strengthen community theatre across the country.

The closing celebration brought everyone together one last time with music, laughter, dancing, bubbles, and a moving performance of "Imagine" sung in multiple languages. It was a fitting end to a week built on friendship, storytelling, and cultural exchange.

aactWORLDfest 2027 Performances

Israel	Yoram Loewenstein Acting School
Italy	Maner Manush
Slovakia	dNO Company
Switzerland	Theatre Studio BELOE
United Kingdom	The Scrambled Egg Theatre Company
Latin American Culture	Cazateatro Bilingual Theatre Group based out of Memphis, TN
Poland	Teatr Zapadnia
Ukraine/Russia	Playback Theater Thread based out of Sarasota, FL
Indian Diaspora Theatre	Mandi Theatre, based out of Chicago, IL
Ghana	Ama Oforiwa Aduonum based out of Chicago, IL
US Latino	CreArte Latino Cultural Center based out of Sarasota, FL

Haviva, You're Fired
The Sky in a Room
Playing God
Sweet Addictions
Exposure
I Was There: Memories of Those
Who Had No Choice
Whispering in the Dark
Common Air
Kathputli
Walking with My Ancestors
Voces: Voices of Adolescence

aactWorldfest People's Choice

Best Moment: *Birds in Exposure*, The Scrambled Egg Theatre Company

Best Actor: Luke Martin, The Scrambled Egg Theatre Company

Best Show: *Exposure*, The Scrambled Egg Theatre Company



Members of the Venice Theatre team helped create a welcoming experience for artists and attendees throughout aactWorldFest 2026

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Jayke Workman's Journey From Community Theatre To Broadway

Mary Doveton

Fall 2026 marks milestone birthdays for both the 1996 Broadway revival of *Chicago, the Musical* and Jayke Workman. Both Chicago and Jayke celebrate turning 30 years old!

Jumping Aboard Broadway's Moving Train

For Jayke, a love affair with the stage began in community theatre at the age of nine and just keeps getting better. In June of 2026, immediately after the Tony's, Jayke joined the cast of *Chicago* in the role of Mary Sunshine. When asked how it felt to join the company of a show well into its run, Jayke compared it to jumping on to a moving train! This is especially true for the role of Mary Sunshine. The character doesn't appear on stage until 35 minutes into the show.

Jayke loves referring to this as the "princess track" where you are almost shot out of a canon as you leap into the onstage energy of a production in full swing. While Jayke is not fond of the constant shaving the role requires, they love the staging that keeps

"I'm doing what I've
done my whole life."

the entire cast onstage with the orchestra. They find it thrilling to be able to share the constant onstage energy with the actors and orchestra for the duration of the show.

They admit, though, that following the tracks onstage was a bit easier than learning to navigate the backstage traffic. Arriving an hour and a half before showtime, they do their warmups and

then their makeup. After being wigged and dressed, they travel up four flights of stairs to stage level to join the music and lights.

Jayke revels in the numerous artists who are making guest appearances with the show. They mention Whitney Leavitt, who appeared in *Dancing with the Stars* and starred in *The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives*. The lines of fans outside the stage door, during her performances as Roxie, brought cheering fans and a rock concert atmosphere. When Ryan Silverman played Billy, Jayke loved the opportunity to be on the same stage as someone whose autograph he had sought 15 years earlier.



Jayke treasures these connections and is generous in praise for fellow performers. Ultimately, however, Jayke claims that being in a Broadway show can have much in common with the feelings experienced by community theatre actors—people coming together with energy and love to put on a show. Jayke continues, "I'm doing what I've done my whole life."

While Jayke credits much of their love of theatre and success today to being a part of community theatre from such a young age, they stress that each person's journey is unique, and it is not a linear one. Jayke's advice, "You can't compare your timeline with anyone else's. Say yes to everything—small gigs, demos, free performances. Think how lucky you are to be performing. Audition all the time, hurry up and then wait."

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A Beginning that Became “Understandable, Understandable...”

Jayke's own timeline started with a small-town cabaret appearance with their mom and then led to Jayke's first leading role, as JoJo in *Seussical, the Musical*, at Theatre Lawrence, followed by Colin in *The Secret Garden*. Then came shows in Kansas City, a move to Minnesota with more shows, this time with Rochester Civic Theatre, where they appeared in the ensemble for the theatre's production of *Chicago* when they were still in their teens.

These shows, plus the Arts High School in Minneapolis, prepared Jayke for unified auditions in the city of Chicago—where they auditioned with Mary Sunshine's song from *Chicago the Musical*. The audition and their hard work were rewarded with a full scholarship to the Hartt School at the University of Hartford.

Graduation from the Hartt School brought an immediate tour gig with—understandably—*Chicago, the Musical*. Unfortunately, after four weeks the run was cut short as Covid closed everything down. Other work and short gigs at regional theatres followed, until on December 21, 2021, the call came—get a Covid test, get to New York's Ambassador Theatre—and bring your own shoes. They were going on for the first time as Mary Sunshine in *Chicago* on Broadway! That performance led to the standby gig for the show. Now Jayke is playing the coveted role eight times a week.

Jayke describes one of their greatest joys along the way as having opportunities to meet and work with so many talented people and to learn new skills. For example, their time at a regional theatre in Colorado led to a stint back in New York learning the basics of how to

make custom wigs for *Saturday Night Live*, and maybe also learning along the way that wig making was not their thing!

However, their role of podcaster felt more comfortable, and Jayke has been hosting the podcast, “Oh My Pod, You Guys,” sponsored by Broadway World for several years. Jayke enjoys the opportunities it provides to visit with the many artists they have met.

Coming Full Circle—and Moving Forward

Jayke also celebrates coming full circle from their youthful stage work in *Seussical* to now having opportunities to sing for and work with some of the artists who created the original *Seussical*, including Lynn Ahrens who wrote the show, and Janine LaManna who played Gertrude McFuzz. Jayke also relishes being part of the development of a new musical version of *A Wrinkle in Time*, and recently celebrated their first solo show in Provincetown.

Guiding their stage and life's journey is Jayke's belief that “ultimately it is about the relationships that you build, making friends everywhere, being kind to others and true to yourself.”



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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Theatre Harrisburg at 100

A Century of Community, Resilience, and the Spotlight

Quiana Clark-Roland

In 1926, a group of women gathered in the basement of the public library in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, with an audacious idea. Inspired by the Little Theatre movement (a grassroots effort to bring Broadway-style theatre to local communities) they laid the foundation for what would become Theatre Harrisburg. One hundred years later, that vision endures, though the journey has been anything but a straight line.

“What started as the Harrisburg Community Theatre has weathered depressions, wars, recessions, a pandemic, and even a health outbreak that forced the production team to burn all their costumes, and still, we went back into production,” said Executive Director Lorien Reese Mahay, who joined the organization in 2021. “That says everything about who we are.”

Theatre Harrisburg is the oldest performing arts organization in central Pennsylvania and one of the oldest continuously operating community theatres in the United States. It currently operates with a small full-time staff, while its plays and musicals are produced by volunteers.

From Basement Beginnings to Resident Company

The original vision was simple yet revolutionary for its time: bring professional-caliber theatre to Harrisburg. The founding women, who also launched the city’s orchestra, began rehearsals in that cramped library basement. Their first production, *The Dover Road*, didn’t just open as a show; it opened a movement.



Early rehearsals at Theatre Harrisburg

For decades, the company performed wherever space could be found. A major turning point arrived when Theatre Harrisburg began performing in the rented gymnasium of the Jewish Community Center, where it remained “in residence” for almost 20 years. By the 1950s, a shift was underway. The theatre, which had produced only plays, began venturing into musical theatre, a genre that would come to define its identity.

“The community skews toward musicals,” Lorien said. “It’s fascinating to see the difference between what was on Broadway and what we were producing on our stages. We’ve always had our own personality.”

That personality found a permanent home when the theatre opened its own venue in 1951 and, in 1999, officially changed its name to Theatre Harrisburg. Today, the organization operates

in two distinctive spaces. The Krevsky Center houses a 150-seat flexible black box theatre, as well as administrative offices and space for rehearsals, set construction, prop storage, costume creation, and storage. Three miles away—not far from the Pennsylvania State Capitol complex—is the Whitaker Center, a 650-seat proscenium-style venue with an automated rigging system that is used for larger productions and musicals.

But even with multiple venues, challenges persist. The theatre spent a decade converting its main area into a black box, and space limitations remain a daily reality.

“We run into challenges with production storage and missing dedicated education space,” Lorien explained. “We have to keep an intricate calendar to utilize our spaces for all our activities. Sometimes we rely on community partners and external spaces just to find rehearsal room.”

It’s a constraint born of success—a problem many community theatres would welcome—but it points to larger aspirations for the next century.



A scene from *Follies* in Concert

The Centennial Celebration: A Season of Joy

Rather than selecting a thematic historical through-line, Theatre Harrisburg chose celebration itself as its centennial theme.

“We wanted a celebratory season that gets the community excited,” Lorien said. The result is an all-musical season, punctuated by historical projects, including a reading of *The Dover Road* in the very basement where it all began. “It was very cool. The community would like to see a full staging of it.”

continued on page 20 ▷

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Theatre Harrisburg continued from page 18

The anniversary kicked off with a New Year's Eve party at The King Mansion in Harrisburg, and culminated in a 100th anniversary gala at The Willows at Ashcombe Mansion with a 1920s theme. This gala featured a collaboration with the Harrisburg Art Association, which is also celebrating its 100th birthday.

The crown jewel in Theatre Harrisburg's centennial season was a collaboration with the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra, performing *Follies In Concert* for two performances at the historic Forum Auditorium in Harrisburg. It was another nod to the past, Lorien explained: "*Follies* was the first show we did when we became the resident theatre at the Whitaker Center."

Summer will bring a community day focused on celebrating volunteers: "As a new leader, I've been getting to know our place in the arts ecosystem," Lorien said. "We haven't been able to really celebrate our volunteers in a big way yet. That changes this year."



A scene from *Guys and Dolls*

Programming with Purpose

The centennial season showcases the breadth of Theatre Harrisburg's capabilities. *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* became the largest production ever mounted in the Krevsky Center, and "it challenged us in a great way." *Guys and Dolls*, the first musical the company ever produced, returned in November, this time to the Whitaker Center.

A beloved Christmas tradition, the radio play *Merry Christmas, George Bailey*, was revived with its original cast. *The Last Five Years* answered community requests, culled from years of season selection committee recommendations. *I Love You, You're Perfect*,

"This isn't just a celebration of theatre. It's a celebration of community."

Now Change reminds the organization of its ongoing mission, Lorien said: "We have to continue to adapt and continue to do the work."

Perhaps most significantly, the theatre's participation in The Penguin Project will end its season with Disney's *Dare to Dream JR.*

"We now have a waiting list for mentors for this year's Penguin Project," Lorien said. "That program has grown beyond what we imagined." See our story on the nationwide Penguin Project in the Fall 2025 issue of Spotlight at aact.org/spotlight.

How Shows Get Chosen: A Collaborative Democracy

Without a formal artistic director, Theatre Harrisburg has developed a distinctive selection process. The Executive Director brings ideas to staff, who represent a wide range of ages and artists' perspectives. Discussions cover budget, technical needs, and community appetite. Then the Board weighs in, representing donors, subscribers, and stakeholders in the theatre's mission.



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"If I'm asking this team to commit to a season, I want them to have input on the productions," Lorien explained. "It's about identifying the trusted voices that represent your community."

Surviving Crisis After Crisis

Covid shuttered the theatre mid-show in spring 2020, and the doors did not reopen until October 2021.

As many theatres struggled to rebuild fundraising levels post-Covid, Theatre Harrisburg was no exception.

"It was a significant lift to get funding for the 100th season," Lorien admitted. "The need is so great that it's been difficult to sustain past fundraising amounts. But the audience is coming back for us. There's tremendous pressure to pick the right show, to figure out what the community needs. The margins are slim. But we're still here."

Honoring the Past, Embracing the Future

When asked what advice she would offer other theatres approaching a major milestone, Lorien did not hesitate.

"Start earlier than you think you need to," she said. "Put together a committee that wants to do the work, not just advise you on what to do. Spend time building relationships in your community in preparation for making that one big ask. Really think about who in the community you want to buy in and be there. When the time comes, that makes the ask more approachable. They're more invested in your success—because it's not just a celebration of theatre. It's a celebration of community."

The centennial has also provided a time of remembrance and gratitude.

"We lost two of our people, Jay and Nancy Krevsky," Lorien said. "Honoring the people who are responsible for where we are now has been a very big part of this."

She also credits AACT for providing perspective, and giving her "the opportunity to listen and learn from others. We're one of the many theatres who have made it this far. I'm deeply appreciative."

Lorien calls the theatre's guiding philosophy "radical collaboration." It's an approach that has served Theatre Harrisburg well for 100 years, and one that will carry it into its second century, whether in a renovated Krevsky Center, the revitalized downtown, or wherever the community needs the spotlight to shine.

Theatre Harrisburg's centennial 2026-27 season continues with upcoming productions.

For tickets and information, visit TheatreHarrisburg.com.



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 regional 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 a passionate arts advocate.



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Illuminating the Trans Experience

PLAYWRIGHT'S
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An Interview with Mikki Gillette on Theatre, Visibility, and the Spark of Community

Dorinda Toner

Dubbed “the Joan of Arc of the trans community in Portland theatre” by *Oregon Arts Watch*, playwright Mikki Gillette’s *American Girl* was featured in *American Theatre* and voted Best Play in the 2023 *BroadwayWorld* Portland Awards.

In this interview with *Spotlight* Editorial Team member Dorinda Toner, Mikki provides an inside look at her creative methods and guiding principles. Dorinda is Producing Artistic Director of Portland’s Twilight Theater Company, which has produced Mikki’s work.

(Note that some responses have been condensed due to space limitations.)



Mikki Gillette

DT: What would you like people to know about you, the person, the playwright?

MG: When I was in college, I was really in love with literature, and I wanted to be a writer. I spent a lot of time studying the things I loved and trying to figure out how they worked, and how to find a voice that was in the tradition of those things. There is a part of me that loves creating—it’s the most exciting thing. When I transitioned,

I realized there was a chance to express something that hadn’t really been expressed, as far as I knew, in theatre, about the trans experience. My drive was to create plays that [would illuminate an] experience that not everybody knows about—or even if they are trans, don’t get to see depicted or dramatized very often.

I really went looking [for those] in my early transition. I would find movies that were made by cisgender filmmakers, [but] I would look around for plays and didn’t really see anyone doing the kind of thing I wanted to do. So, it did feel like there was new ground to cover.

DT: It’s not that there haven’t been queer people in our theatre, TV, or movies, but they were often caricatured or tokenized.

MG: Thank you! I haven’t seen the musical *Kinky Boots*, but when I watched the film, that’s exactly how I felt about the drag queen character. You know, she was, like, fabulous, and she helped the guy with his factory and helped him have the courage to fall in love, but even though she was clearly a very sexual person—she had no sexual partners.

DT: I find a lot of drag queens are framed like a fairy godmother. They show up, dispense wisdom, encourage us, then sashay away in a trail of glitter. It’s charming, but I want to know who they are when they go home and take off their makeup.

MG: Yes, exactly!

DT: You’ve talked about an early love of literature. What was the moment when you said, “I’m going to be a playwright?”

MG: I finished college, and I had this friend, and we thought we were going to make films, (*everybody* in Los Angeles thinks they’re going to make films). I would write them, and he would direct them. I was writing screenplays that were really generic, and he thought, “I’ll be able to sell these, and then we’ll use that money for *our* films.” But one day I went for a jog, and when I came home, I had this thought that if I had been hit by a car and died on that jog, I wouldn’t have left anything of value, artistically. That caused me to take some time to really look at the things that had meant the most to me when I was reading. And almost like a mechanic taking a car apart, figure out how the car is put together. And the more I got into that process, the more I realized that the things I wanted to write about, I just wasn’t seeing done. And in film, it’s almost a generalization that nobody cares about the

continued on page 20 ▶

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Playwrights Corner *continued from page 22*

screenplay—it's the most disposable part of the process. I wanted it to be valued somehow, and it felt like that was happening more in theatre.

DT: What's your creative method?

MG: I'm pretty intuitive in the way I write. I don't really outline, and the stories just kind of show up. The first draft is exciting in that way, because I don't necessarily know where it's going. And those plays tend to be less political, I think, because they're drawn from a time before I had transitioned. Something like *The Dark Stuff*, which, as you know, Twilight Theater is doing [in October].

DT: That piece is deeply personal. And while it is very much a trans woman's experience, it's also an every-woman's experience. There's a universality to it which feels accessible to a wide audience. I think what *The Dark Stuff* does well is asking us to recognize our similarities, our sameness. I think it's beautifully done.

MG: I appreciate that. There *is* something fascinating about how the specific can become universal in that way.

DT: And isn't that when theatre is at its most successful? When we sit in the audience and see ourselves—for good or for bad?

MG: I think so, too.

DT: Would you say the work is maturing as you gain experience?

MG: I think so. I can see that there's more symmetry in the structure. Things seem a little more balanced. Or even as I'm writing, I'll be like, oh, this scene is going to be [at] the one-third point, so there's probably going to be a big kind of climax. I become aware of the structure as I work on it, [because] what I'm writing about, I'm *discovering* things about. Hopefully, there's a little more control now in the way the story is told that carries a viewer along better.

DT: Do the plot lines or the characters ever make choices or go in directions that you didn't expect when you started?

MG: Yeah, absolutely. And that can be really fun. I really liked the novels of Dostoevsky when I was younger, and part of that was because things would be going along, and then there would be this big scene where everything goes topsy-turvy. It's almost like the whole story had been reset, and people had to figure out where they were in relation to each other. It's not something I consciously plan, but I really love when that happens in a story.

DT: I agree. What kind of advice would you give those who want to tell stories but don't know where to start?

MG: Something that I've heard is there is this fear that, [while] they might want to tell a story like this, they wouldn't have the actors to do it. I would say if that is your fear, you can start with one community member, because the trans community usually tends to be pretty tight. And another cool thing is that actors like this really develop. I've seen growth among people that we've



Scene from American Girl

worked with and that's been really exciting.

DT: Community theatres are great at building community and making space for people. Your work has garnered a lot of attention, including some awards.

MG: When *American Girl* won the *Broadway-World* Portland Award, I was surprised, because the show I'd done the

previous year came in, 8th or 9th. But *American Girl* was just always at the top in the voting, which might have had to do with the subject matter, which was a true story about someone who was killed in a hate crime, who was trans. It wasn't a show that sold out every night (I think because of the subject matter), so it was nice that it was recognized in that way.

DT: How do folks find out more about your plays? How do they license your work?

MG: I have a website, and people can contact me there. I don't have representation, so they can work directly with me to license. I'm fortunate [that I don't need to] rely on royalties to make a living, and I want to make it possible for anybody to produce my work.

DT: Anything else you'd like to share?

MG: It's been a great experience working with Twilight Theater Company on your Reader Series, and now with the upcoming production [of *The Dark Stuff*]. We don't live in a country that makes it easy to create art, which is a shame. I really admire theatre groups where people volunteer their time because they love it. There's a spark that you don't necessarily see at regional theatre. I'm glad to be a part of that with you.

DT: It's been a joy for us. I hope people feel inspired by what you're doing, visit your website [mikkigillette.com] to find pieces they can bring to their own communities.

MG: It was a great conversation. Thank you!



Dorinda is a proud Board Member of AACT, a past Vice-President of PATA (Portland Area Theatre Alliance) and currently serves on the board of OCTA (Oregon Community Theatre Alliance). An award-winning actress, Dorinda has been performing on stages across North America for over 40 years. She studied Theater/Directing at University and is also a multi-album Canadian Recording Artist. A prolific director, she has won several awards for her work, including Portland BroadwayWorld's Best Director and Best Play 2021 and Willamette Week's Best Play of 2019. Dorinda enjoys Intimacy Directing and has a level 2 certification with the IDC (Intimacy Directors & Coordinators). Dorinda is a Certified DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging) Human Resources Specialist.

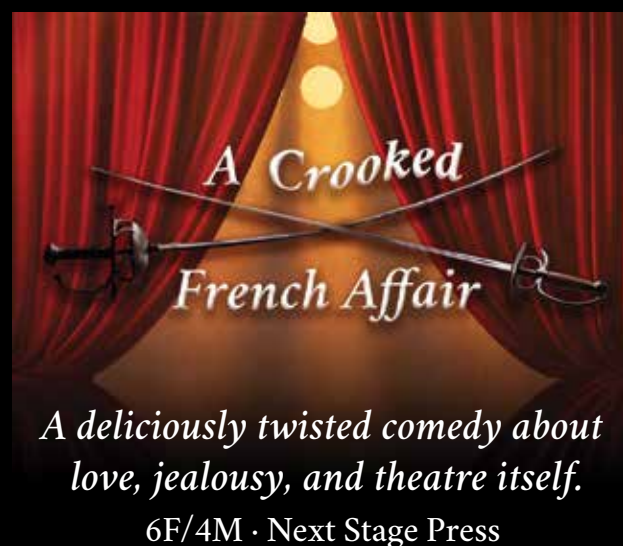
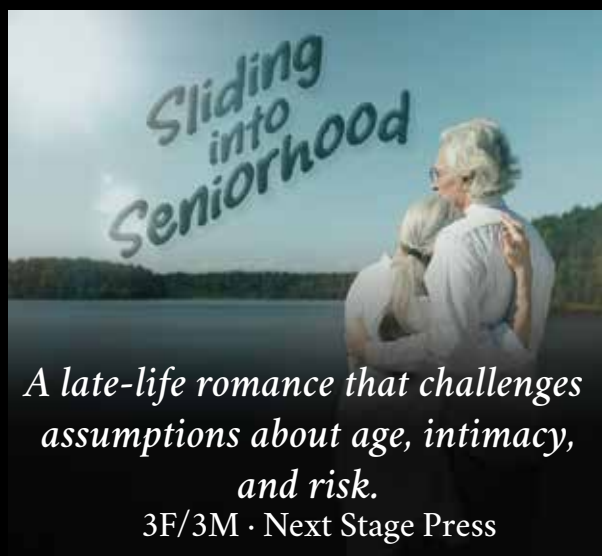


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Setting the 2027 Stage

AACT Community Theatre Survey

Michael Cochran

A breakout musical, a wave of original work, and some hard conversations about the classics — here's what 107 community theatres across 35 states are telling us about the season ahead.

Across 35 states this season, one title kept turning up on marquee after marquee: *Come From Away*, selected by 26 different theatres—nearly four times the reach of anything that topped the chart a year ago. That single statistic is the headline of a much bigger story captured in this year's Season Selection Survey, in which 107 community theatres opened their selection notes, ticket reports, and committee debates to tell us what an estimated 469,235 audience members will see on stage in 2027.

A Field as Big as the Country Itself

The responding theatres span every corner of the budget spectrum, and no single size dominates the picture. The largest cluster, 17% of respondents, operates on budgets between \$100,000 and \$250,000, with two more groups—\$50,000–\$100,000 and \$250,000–\$500,000—each representing 16%. Together, these three budget tiers account for roughly half the survey pool, while the remaining half stretches from shoestring operations under \$25,000 to organizations well into seven figures. Add up every

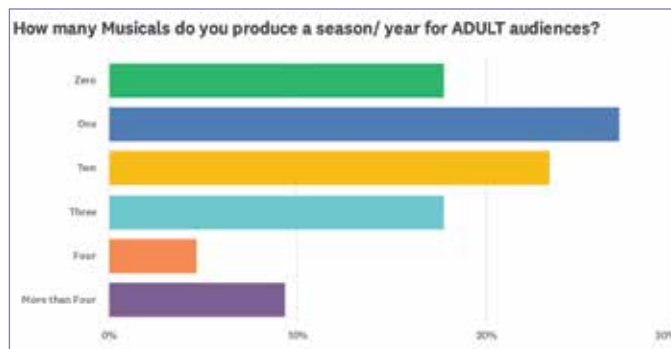
musical, play, youth show, and alternate production these theatres are mounting, and the total comes to 536 titles—and that's with several theatres that were still finalizing their selections.

Come From Away Steals the Spotlight

Of the 123 unique musical titles submitted, nothing came close to *Come From Away*. *Frozen* held a distant second place with seven productions, while *Les Misérables* and *Dear Evan Hansen* tied for third with four productions each.

Last season, the most-produced musicals—*Annie* and *The Rocky Horror Show*—topped out at seven productions apiece, with *Frozen* and *Matilda* close behind at five. This year, *Come From Away* alone more than tripled that ceiling.

A second tier of titles landed three productions each, including *The Addams Family*, *Anastasia*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Gentlemen's Guide to Love and Murder*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Little Women*, *Once Upon a Mattress*, *Sister Act*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *White Christmas*. A longer list—among them *Annie*, *Cinderella*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Hairspray*, *Mean Girls*, *9 to 5*, *Rent*, *Shrek*, and *West Side Story*—each appeared on two season lists. But the real story of the musical category is its breadth: 81 of the 123 titles submitted—65%—were chosen by only a single theatre, a reminder that for every breakout hit, there are dozens of theatres charting their own course.



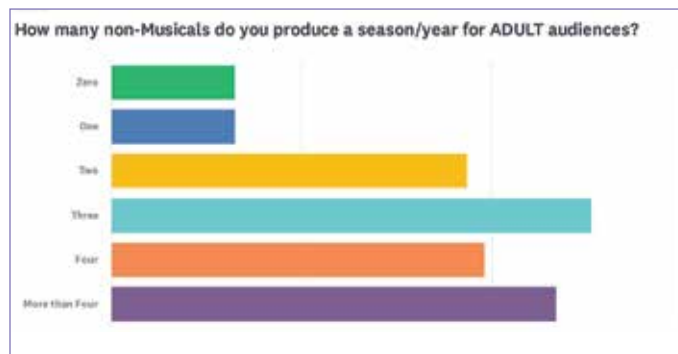
Comedy, Classics, and Community Theatre's Favorite Playwrights

The non-musical category is even more sprawling, with 245 separate titles submitted. William Shakespeare led all playwrights with eight titles in circulation, followed by Neil Simon (six), and Lauren Gunderson and Ken Ludwig tied at five each.

At the top of the title list, *Arsenic and Old Lace* and *Steel Magnolias* tied for first with six productions each, *The Play That Goes Wrong* followed with five, and *Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors* claimed four. A wide field of titles—from *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* and *Calendar Girls* to *Harvey*, *Macbeth*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Silent Sky*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*—each landed three productions, while two dozen more, including *Noises Off*, *Peter and the Starcatcher*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The 39 Steps*, were chosen twice. As with the musicals, the long tail dominates: 174 of the 245 non-musical titles—about 71%—were produced by just one theatre each. (Last year's leaders were *The Cottage* with six productions, and a four-way tie among *Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors*, *Misery*, *Silent Sky*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.)

Youth Stages Keep Singing Disney's Tune

Among the 95 youth titles submitted, *Shrek Jr.* led the pack with six productions, *Newsies Jr.* and *The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical* tied at four each, and *The Lion King Jr.* and *The Little Mermaid* each landed three. A handful of others—*Finding Nemo Jr.*, *Frozen Jr.*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *Legally Blonde Jr.*, and *Shrek the Musical*—were each chosen twice. Zoom out across the whole category, though, and one studio's fingerprints are everywhere: Disney-licensed shows accounted for 12 of the most-produced youth titles, overall.



New Voices, New Work

Every one of the 73 alternate-production titles submitted was unique to a single theatre—no repeats at all. Many of these slots are filled with evenings of original work: ten-minute plays, one-acts, and readings of full-length scripts. Community theatre, it turns out, isn't just a showcase for local actors; it's increasingly a launchpad for local playwrights. That spirit extends into programming philosophy more broadly: 53% of theatres say they strongly agree or agree that inclusive initiatives now actively inform how they build a season.

A Resource Hiding in Plain Sight

If there's one underused tool this year's survey turned up, it's AACT's NewPlayFest. Held every two years in partnership with Dramatic Publishing, the competition draws hundreds of submissions each cycle. A national panel of readers narrows that field to 12 finalist scripts, which are then sent out to six theatres across the country to read, evaluate, and ultimately choose for premiere production and publication. Across six cycles, that process has produced 37 published scripts—all of them road-tested in front of community theatre audiences. A persistent misconception in this year's responses was that these plays are reserved for the theatres chosen to premiere them; in fact, several NewPlayFest titles have gone on to become some of the most produced shows in the country. [Free samples and descriptions are available at dramaticpublishing.com, and a full list of past winners can be found at aact.org/newplayfest—worth a look before your next selection meeting.]

When the Classics Don't Travel Well

This year's survey also asked a harder question: which once-popular classics are theatres now hesitant to produce because they haven't aged well? The list that came back included *Carousel*, *The King and I*, *South Pacific*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Peter Pan*, *Oklahoma!*, *Seven Brides for Seven*

continued on page 28 ▸

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Setting the Stage for 2027 *continued from page 27*

Brothers, *Show Boat*, several Neil Simon titles, *The Foreigner*, and *You Can't Take It with You*. Many respondents said they wished playwrights or their estates would revisit these scripts for modern audiences; others said they've found ways to stage the material while engaging audiences directly with its difficult elements, and some communities have embraced the challenge head-on. It's a conversation worth continuing—if your theatre has found a way to make a difficult classic work for your community, we'd like to hear about it.

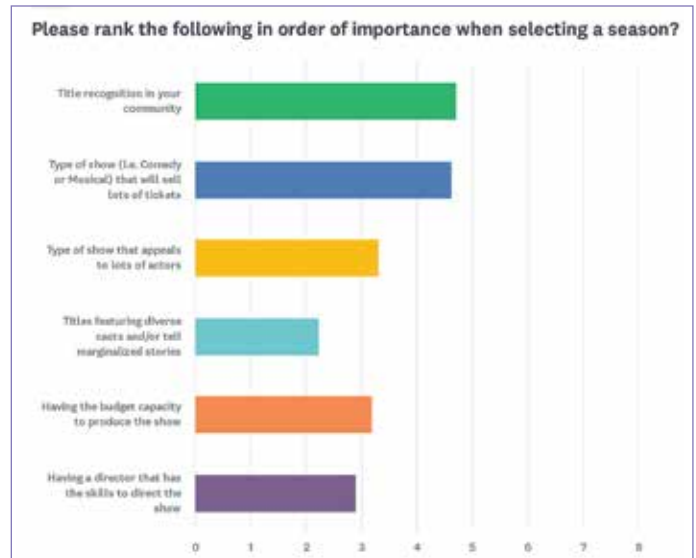
Behind the Curtain: How Seasons Take Shape

Most respondents, 68% (73 theatres), still run a traditional fall-to-spring season, and the largest single group, 47% (51 theatres), announces that season between April and June—timing that often lines up with season ticket sales, which 71% of theatres offer. Programming skews heavily toward adult audiences: nearly 80% of theatres produce primarily for adults, just 8% split evenly between adult and youth programming, while 2% lean youth-majority. A Christmas show remains a season-ticket staple for 55% of theatres.

As for volume, the largest segment of theatres (33%) stages six to eight shows a year, followed by 25% producing three to five and 16% producing a heavier slate of 11 to 14. Break that down by genre, and musicals trend toward restraint—27% of theatres produce exactly one musical a year, 23% produce two, and 17% produce three, while 17% skip musicals entirely. Non-musical programming runs a bit fuller: three plays a year is the most common pattern (25%), followed closely by theatres producing more than four (23%) and exactly four (19%).

Picking Titles—and Fighting for Them

When it comes to actually choosing a season, word of mouth still rules: 67% of theatres cite it as their top source of information, ahead of watching what peer theatres are selecting (54%) and browsing publishing-house websites (51%). The obstacles are just as telling. More than half of respondents, 54%, named the



cost of royalties and rights as their biggest challenge, followed by competition with nearby theatres chasing the same titles (48%) and difficulty securing rights to in-demand new shows (46%).

Original work, meanwhile, is holding its own: 45% of theatres have produced an original script in the past three years, against 47% who haven't—and among those who took the leap, financial success outpaced disappointment by a 3-to-1 margin. That's a notable result, given how heavily word of mouth and peer-watching factor into title selection elsewhere in the survey; it suggests audiences are more willing to take a chance on something new than theatres might assume. In terms of actors used, the largest group of theatres (43%) puts 26 to 99 actors on stage in a given year, with the next largest tier (30%) fielding 100 to 199.

The Takeaway

Taken together, the 2027 survey paints a vivid picture of a field that is anything but uniform—diverse in budget, geography, and artistic ambition, yet bound by a shared instinct to serve its community. From the runaway popularity of *Come From Away* to the quiet persistence of original work being developed from coast to coast, community theatres are doing far more than restaging familiar favorites. They're wrestling honestly with the legacy of classics that no longer fit, building inclusive programming into the selection process itself, and giving new scripts—including AACT's own NewPlayFest winners—a real shot at the stage.

With nearly half a million audience members served annually by just these 107 theatres, the reach is wide and the stakes are real. Whatever the budget or the size of the house, the data points to one conclusion: community theatre remains one of the most responsive art forms in the country, shaped season after season by its audiences, its actors, and the conversations happening in towns large and small.



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 retired as Executive and Artistic Director in 2025, and continues as a freelance director and consultant.

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More Than a Show: What Theatre Really Builds

Behind every production is a process that shapes empathy, confidence, resilience, and community.

Nicholas Brown

A few minutes before a performance begins, there is a familiar kind of chaos backstage.

Someone is searching for a missing prop. A costume zipper has suddenly become everyone's problem. An actor is quietly running lines in the corner while a stage manager checks the same cue sheet for the twentieth time. Everyone is busy. Everyone is nervous. And somehow, despite all evidence to the contrary, the show always seems to happen. Everyone in theatre knows this feeling. What I've started to wonder, though, is why we keep coming back to it.

Why do people volunteer countless hours to build sets, sew costumes, learn lines, paint scenery, and spend their evenings in rehearsal halls? Why do young people find a second home in theatre programs? And why do so many adults look back on their theatre experiences from their youth as some of the most meaningful years of their lives?

After spending the last year researching the impact of theatre participation, I kept arriving at the same conclusion: The most important thing theatre creates may not be the performance at all.

It's the people.

For centuries, thinkers have debated whether theatre has the power to shape us. Plato worried that performance could pull people away from reality. Aristotle saw something different. He believed theatre helped people better understand themselves and others. More than two thousand years later, rehearsal rooms around the world seem to be proving his point.

In their book *Drama, Speaking and Listening: The Treasure of Oracy*, John O'Toole and Madonna Stinson describe drama as "putting ourselves in other people's shoes to imagine human situations and contexts that are or might be." That idea sits at the heart of what theatre does. It invites us to step outside ourselves for a while.

The interesting thing is that the more time people spend trying to understand characters, the more they seem to understand real people too.

Theatre also has a unique relationship with failure. That might sound strange, considering how much effort goes into creating a successful production. But just think about what rehearsal actually looks like. It's a process built on revision. Scenes don't work the first time. Blocking changes. Lines are dropped on stage. Entire ideas get thrown out and rebuilt. Yet nobody considers those moments unusual. They're expected. Everyone continues to say, "the show must go on."

In theatre, mistakes are rarely treated as dead ends. They tell us what needs to change.

Over time, actors and production crews develop a different relationship with challenges. They become more willing to attempt, adjust, and try again.

For many people, theatre is the first community where they feel fully accepted.

I've always loved the fact that creative work creates a safe space where people feel they can take risks. That's exactly what a good rehearsal room becomes. It creates space to experiment without fear that every little mistake will define you forever.

That lesson extends far beyond the stage. The same can be said for confidence. Many people assume theatre naturally attracts confident individuals. In reality, plenty of theatre people begin as some of the quietest people in the room. What theatre provides is practice. Practice speaking in front of people. Practice making decisions. Practice being seen.

In 2019, Carmel Conn published *Using Drama with Children on the Autism Spectrum*, a study that explored how drama can help neurodivergent children develop confidence and communication skills. Many of the students entered the program with no theatre experience and described themselves as shy, reserved, or hesitant to speak in front of others. Yet once they stepped into a role, something changed. Through their characters, they experimented with new ways of speaking, carrying themselves, and interacting with the world. A different posture, a different tone of voice, or a different attitude suddenly felt possible.

What makes this finding so interesting is that the confidence did not stay on the stage. As students became more comfortable exploring these traits through their characters, they began to realize that those behaviors were not as difficult or unattainable as they had once believed. By the conclusion of the study, almost all the participants reported increased confidence, carrying skills they had practiced by playing their roles into their everyday lives. The stage had given them a safe place to try new ways of being, and in doing so, helped them discover new possibilities within themselves.

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continued on page 32 ▷

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More than a Show *continued from page 30*

I've seen it happen countless times. The shy student volunteers for a leadership position. The nervous actor becomes comfortable speaking in front of large groups. The kid who barely spoke at the first rehearsal is leading warm-ups by closing night. The transformation rarely happens overnight, but it happens. And it happens to many people who participate in community theatre.

None of this occurs in isolation. Theatre might be one of the most collaborative activities humans have ever invented. Every production is essentially a giant exercise in learning how to work with other people. Actors rely on directors, directors rely on designers, designers rely on technicians, technicians rely on stage managers, the list goes on. Everyone relies on someone. A production only works when people support one another.

In a world that often emphasizes individual achievement, the world of theatre shows us that success is often shared. Perhaps that's why theatre becomes such a powerful place for identity and belonging. For many people, theatre is the first community where they feel fully accepted. It becomes a place where differences are valued rather than hidden. A place where creativity is welcomed. A place where people discover strengths they didn't know they had.

Theatre asks participants to tell stories, but it also helps them make sense of their own.

Drama is an opportunity to reframe, reimagine, and continue to question the templates of how we live. People explore ideas. Test perspectives. Examine experiences. And, in doing so, they gradually develop a clearer understanding of who they are. And

perhaps that's the real gift of theatre. Not the applause. Not even the performance itself. The gift is growth. Growth in character and growth in life.

Long after the set is struck, the lessons remain. The empathy developed while understanding a character. The resilience built through rehearsal. The confidence gained by taking risks. The friendships formed while creating something together. The production eventually ends. The impact doesn't.

Aristotle believed theatre could help us better understand what it means to be human. Looking around today's rehearsal halls, community theatres, and school stages, it's easy to conclude that he was right.



Nicholas Brown is a freshman at Northwestern University with a lifelong passion for theatre. He has been acting for nearly 15 years and has worked behind the scenes in stage management and production. Nicholas has trained and performed with South Coast Repertory Theatre and participated in Northwestern University's National High School Institute Theatre Arts program, where he focused on stage management and design technology. He continues to pursue opportunities across many areas of theatre, with a particular interest in building sustainable business models with mission-driven causes, and looks forward to growing as an artist, collaborator, and member of the broader theatre community. Nicholas currently serves on the AACT Editorial Team for Spotlight Magazine.



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Theatre Traditions

The Little Rituals That Hold Us Together

Michelle Swink

In our last issue, we shared some of the rituals, superstitions, and traditions in community theatres across the country. Like those, the ones below create a shared language, a sense of belonging, and that quiet feeling of “you’re one of us now.”

“Knock ‘em dead” and carrying the past forward

At Players de Noc in Escanaba, Michigan, opening night includes a “fight song” that has nothing to do with theatre... except for the spirit of it, and a lyric that ends with “knock ‘em dead.”

The song has been around for decades, passed from leader to leader. It loosens people up, revs them up, and brings past company members into the room. Katherine LeDuc shared two moments when the tradition hit especially hard: once, when they performed the fight song surrounding a long-time member’s gravestone during a cemetery walk; and again, the first time they did it after their theatre suffered a fire and the company was temporarily housed elsewhere. The song, silly as it is, became a promise: we’re still here, and we will come back.

Crew family photos and the unseen heart of a production

At TheaterWorks in Peoria, Arizona, every production includes a tradition that belongs to the folks who keep the show running: the Stage Management and Run Crew take a “Family Photo.” Sometimes it’s posed on the stage, sometimes around the set, sometimes just ridiculous faces.

It started as a simple wish to capture memories, the same way casts often do. But it stuck because crew members began

to expect it, look forward to it, and feel seen by it. One person even shared they like taking it early in the run so they can set it as their phone background for the rest of the show. That detail says everything: traditions are often small, but the belonging they create is huge.

Ghost lights, ghosts, and the people who never really leave

Some traditions are about good luck. Some are about remembrance. At Albuquerque Little Theatre in New Mexico, the two are entwined.

ALT has a resident spirit named Manny, their former Technical Director. When Manny passed, his ashes were placed under the stage at his family’s request. His Christmas tree goes up every year without fail, and his hat still lives in the shop and “is staying put for good.” Over time, staff, volunteers, performers, and patrons have shared experiences that make Manny feel like a continued presence in the building. When a show process gets especially tough, people sometimes talk to the space, to Manny, and ask for help. Often, they swear things go more smoothly after.

It’s a tradition rooted in love, history, and the feeling that a theatre is more than a building. It’s a keeper of stories, including the stories of the people who built it.

A mouse named Purl and a duck that could cause a riot

If you want proof that community theatres are powered by whimsy, look no further than two long-running good-luck traditions:

At Theatre Lawrence in Kansas, a small toy mouse named Purl lives onstage for every mainstage production. She began around 1980 when volunteer Jack Riegel started placing her on each set, then dressing her up with show-themed costumes and props. Over the years, Purl has appeared in everything from fishnets and a bustier (*Rocky Horror*) to a tiny leg lamp (*A Christmas Story*). After Jack passed, Purl became a piece of his legacy. Heather Ballinger, who now takes care of Purl, has even added small tributes after other theatre stalwarts have passed: a funny tie, a bird, a paintbrush, something green.

And at Fort Wayne Civic Theatre in Indiana, there’s a rubber duck hidden in every set, every production, for the last 30 years. If you find it, you cannot tell anyone where it is until strike. You do get bragging rights, and you are allowed (encouraged?) to intentionally mislead people about its location.

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Crew posed on and around the Greased Lightning set at TheatreWorks



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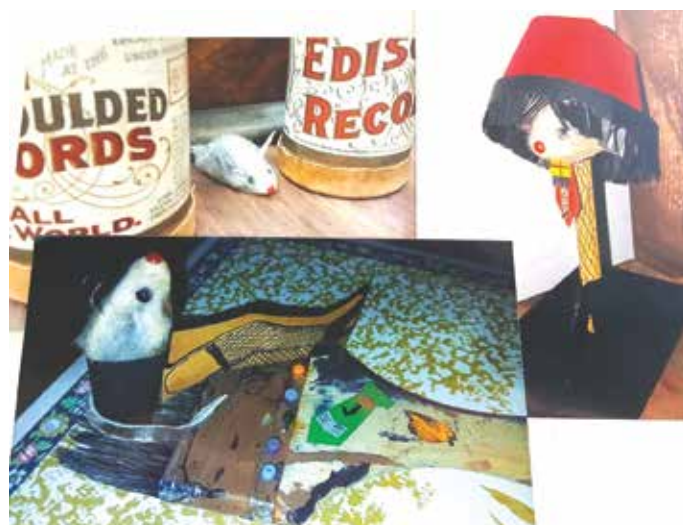
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Purl in The Glass Menagerie, A Christmas Story, and The Rocky Horror Show (Theatre Lawrence)

About 10 years ago, the tradition expanded into show-themed volunteer ducks, given as gifts to those who help bring each production to life. “Duck Distribution Night” is a thing, and the ducks have become such cherished souvenirs that some volunteers build entire duck shelves at home.

Ashley Brassell, the current keeper of the duck tradition, put it plainly: if the ducks disappeared, “many of our volunteers would riot.”

And honestly? We believe it.

Why these traditions matter

Reading these stories, you start to see the pattern: traditions are not just cute extras. They’re how community theatre keeps its balance.

They create a pause before the leap of performance. They turn stress into laughter. They honor the people who came before. They welcome new folks without making them “new” for very long. They make a theatre feel like a home, even when the building changes, even after a fire, even when leadership shifts, even when time moves forward.

A cookie can do that. A brick can do that. A pajama day can do that.

Community theatre is built on shared work, yes. But it’s also built on shared rituals. The moments that say: we’re here, together, and this matters.



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.



Ghost Light Required

The Enduring Mystery of Theatre Ghosts

Katrina Ploof and Lynn Nelson

Every theatre has one.

Maybe it's the little girl who giggles from the balcony when no one else is in the building. Maybe it's the mischievous stagehand who moves props after everyone has gone home. Maybe it's simply the unexplained feeling that you are never truly alone when you're working late.

Whether you believe in ghosts or not, theatre people have been swapping supernatural stories for centuries. In fact, it may be one of the few traditions more universal than opening night jitters or the ritual of wishing each other "break a leg."

As Shakespeare's ghost in Hamlet reminds us, "Remember me." And perhaps that's exactly what theatre ghosts are all about.



A Tradition Older Than the Ghost Light

Many community theatres occupy buildings with fascinating histories. Old opera houses, vaudeville palaces, movie houses, converted churches, civic auditoriums, and even funeral homes have become gathering places for actors and audiences alike. They carry decades—sometimes centuries—of memories within their walls. Add late-night rehearsals, tech week exhaustion, flickering work lights, aging electrical systems, and creative imaginations, and you've created the perfect environment for legends to flourish.

Sometimes, however, the stories become difficult to explain.

Take the Licking County Players in Newark, Ohio. Their home began life in 1921 as Criss Brothers Funeral Services, and the space now utilized as the backstage and makeup room once served as the embalming room. Unsurprisingly, volunteers have long reported unexplained activity backstage, and many insist the building has permanent residents who never purchased a ticket.

In Tupelo, Mississippi, volunteers at the Lyric Theatre spent years believing they shared the building with a single playful ghost affectionately known as Antoine. Built in 1912 as an opera house, the theatre later became a movie house before returning to live performance. After the devastating 1936 tornado, the building reportedly served as a temporary surgery center and morgue.

Antoine supposedly sings, plays harmless tricks, and has become part of the theatre's identity. More recently, paranormal investigators suggested that Antoine may not be alone and that

multiple entities occupy the historic structure, some less friendly than others. Whether one believes the investigation or not, nearly every longtime volunteer seems to have a story.

Then there is Valparaiso, Indiana's Memorial Opera House, built in 1893, where reports include mysterious figures in the balcony, a couple occupying the loge box, and a little girl who enjoys giggling and playing the piano. Doors refuse to stay where they were left. Lights have minds of their own.

Yet according to staff members, there is one thing the spirits never disturb.

They leave the ghost light alone.

Perhaps the strangest incident came when security cameras captured unexplained objects moving through the house in ways that defied easy explanation. Viewed repeatedly and even slowed down frame by frame, the footage raised more questions than answers. Dust? Camera artifacts? Something else entirely? Everyone who watched reached their own conclusion. See for yourself here: (Real time: aact.org/ghost01, Slow motion: aact.org/ghost02).

Conejo Players Theatre, in Thousand Oaks, California, reserves a seat for "Albert," an English ghost believed to linger around the tech booth. Volunteers say Albert hides props, rearranges costumes, and occasionally announces his presence with unexplained noises backstage.

For years, no one knew his name.

Legend says a volunteer finally left a note asking what he should be called. The next day, the word "Albert" mysteriously appeared on the wall nearby. Coincidence? Elaborate prank? A theatrical sense of humor from beyond?

No one knows.

continued on page 36 ▷



Ghost Light Required *continued from page 35*

ACTS Theatre, in Lake Charles, Louisiana, has its own stories surrounding a building that has survived fire damage, hurricanes, and multiple incarnations over the last century. Volunteers wonder whether William Portie—the beloved "Candyman" who reportedly died there from smoke inhalation—or perhaps someone else entirely—still checks in on rehearsals.

In San Angelo, Texas, Angelo Civic Theatre introduces newcomers to Bart, a ghost so familiar that almost everyone seems to have their own encounter. Bart allegedly locks and unlocks doors, triggers alarms, relocates props, and has a particular talent for switching off the house lights immediately after someone turns them on.

If Bart exists, he apparently enjoys practical jokes.

When the Stage Refuses to Stay Empty

Theatre history is filled with famous ghost stories as well. London's Theatre Royal Drury Lane famously claims its "Man

in Grey," whose appearance in 18th century attire is supposedly considered a sign of good luck for productions. Across the world, actors whisper about mysterious footsteps, phantom applause, and unseen figures watching rehearsals from empty seats.

Perhaps it should not surprise us.

Theatre itself is an exercise in bringing the absent back to life.

Every performance resurrects people who never existed and people who once did. Ancient kings return to speak. Long-dead playwrights tell fresh stories. Audiences collectively suspend disbelief to experience lives that vanish the moment the curtain falls.

As Tom Stoppard wrote in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, "Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where's it going to end?"

Maybe the answer is: backstage.

Why We Keep the Light On

Most theatres also maintain one tradition born from these legends: the ghost light. Officially, it provides practical illumination to prevent accidents on a dark stage. Unofficially, many insist it keeps resident spirits happy by giving them a chance to perform after everyone else has gone home.

No one can prove that, of course.

But remarkably few theatre people are willing to tempt fate by removing it.

Perhaps that is because theatre ghosts represent something larger than the paranormal. They are reminders that every stage has a history. Countless actors have forgotten lines there. Volunteers have painted scenery until midnight. Musicians have tuned orchestras, directors have worried through opening nights, and audiences have laughed, cried, and applauded in the same seats for generations.

Buildings absorb stories.

Communities preserve memories.

Theatre people create legends.

So, if you're alone in your playhouse one evening and hear a distant piano note, glimpse someone sitting in the balcony, or discover that the prop you just placed has wandered across the stage, don't panic.

It could be faulty wiring.

It could be exhaustion.

Or perhaps, somewhere just beyond the footlights, another member of the company simply isn't ready for the final curtain.

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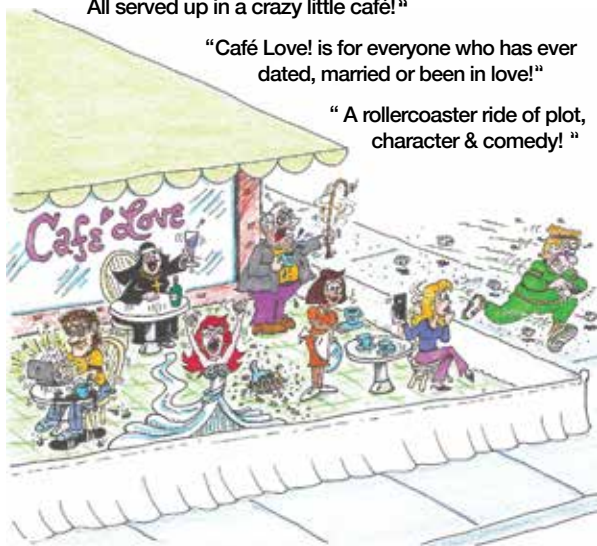
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character & comedy!"



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.



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, and creates the puzzles for Spotlight.





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What it means to be a community theatre today

Michael Cochran

As America marks 250 years of independence, the community theatre movement asks a timely question: after a century of storytelling, rallying neighbors, and defying expectations—what does it mean to be a community theatre today?

What *is* community theatre?

The question sounds simple enough. But ask it in a room full of people who have built careers—and lives—around the answer, and you will find no shortage of answers—and passion. That's why, over the past year, AACT undertook a strategic planning process to tackle that very question, bringing together theatre leaders from across the country, and across the budget spectrum—from all-volunteer troupes operating on less than \$25,000 a year, to multi-million-dollar organizations with dozens of paid staff members.

The answer they arrived at, ultimately, is less about what community theatre *looks* like and more about what it *does*. It gathers people. It tells local stories. It opens its doors.

To understand where community theatre is heading, it helps to know where it has been.

A Movement Born from Protest

The roots of American community theatre stretch back further than most people realize. Amateur theatricals were a feature of Colonial and Revolutionary War life. The Mormons founded the Deseret Theatre around 1850. By 1874, groups like the Aurora Drama Guild in Illinois and the Concord Players in Massachusetts—founded by Louisa May Alcott—were bringing neighbors together on makeshift stages. The Footlight Club, established in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, in 1877, holds the distinction, recognized by AACT, of being the oldest continuously producing community theatre in the United States.

The movement didn't even have its name yet. Over the decades it was called “art theatre,” “little theatre,” “amateur theatre,” and “tributary theatre.” It was not until 1917 that Louise Burleigh coined the phrase “community theatre.”

The catalyst that truly ignited the movement, according to historians Robert Gard and Gertrude Burley, was the 1911 American tour of the Irish Players. Their performances exposed audiences to a standard of theatrical artistry that commercial theatre of the era simply wasn't providing, and across the country, dramatic groups began to form in response.

“Their tour aroused the antagonism of American citizens against the feeble productions of the commercial theatre, and seemed to be the catalyst that caused countless dramatic groups to germinate all over America, as a protest against commercial drama.”

— Robert Gard & Gertrude Burley

Community Theatre: Idea and Achievement (1959)

After World War I, the rationale for the movement began to shift. While many early groups had been devoted to producing challenging European works—Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Lord Dunsany—a new vision emerged. In 1923, Clarence deGoveia argued that the future of “little theatre” lay in nurturing the Ameri-



Raising the borrowed army surplus parachute that served as a tent for the first performance at Oregon's Cottage Theatre's

can playwright. Over the following two decades, more than 100 community theatres were founded, collectively serving as a laboratory for new American voices and filling the void left by the decline of touring professional companies.

By 1939, historians Albert McCleery and Carl Glick estimated that between 500,000 and a million workers were involved in community theatres, with close to 15 million Americans attending their productions each year:

“Community Theatre occupies a peculiarly important position in the American theater picture. It is the largest, by far, of the theater's numerous segments.”

That importance brought responsibility. In 1968, Robert Gard, Martin Balch, and Pauline Temkin expressed concern that the community theatre movement had drifted—that the pursuit of “theatre as art” had given way to theatre as mere diversion, a social gathering place. They called for a national organization to guide, challenge, and hold theatres accountable to the highest standards. That call produced first ACTA, then AACT, whose mission remains the development of excellence across production, management, governance, community relations, and service.

Voices from the Field

To take the pulse of community theatre in 2026, *Spotlight* reached out to 12 theatres across the country. Five responded—a reminder, as one theatre professional noted, that “the challenge of reaching volunteer leaders is still very much with us.”

Below are the highlights of what they shared. It was candid, sometimes surprising, and deeply revealing about the state of an art form that refuses to be easily defined.

Susan Goes, Executive Director

Cottage Theatre | Cottage Grove, Oregon

How was your theatre founded, and how do you define yourselves as a community theatre?

Cottage Theatre's first performance took place outdoors in 1982, under a borrowed army surplus parachute—which was blown away by a gust of wind during the second weekend of performances. Forty-four years later, we own and operate a facility

Continued on page 40 ▷

a rock sails by

Are we alone? What's next?

"Grennan's ability to craft words that make you laugh, sigh, or cry is undeniable."

- Northwest Herald

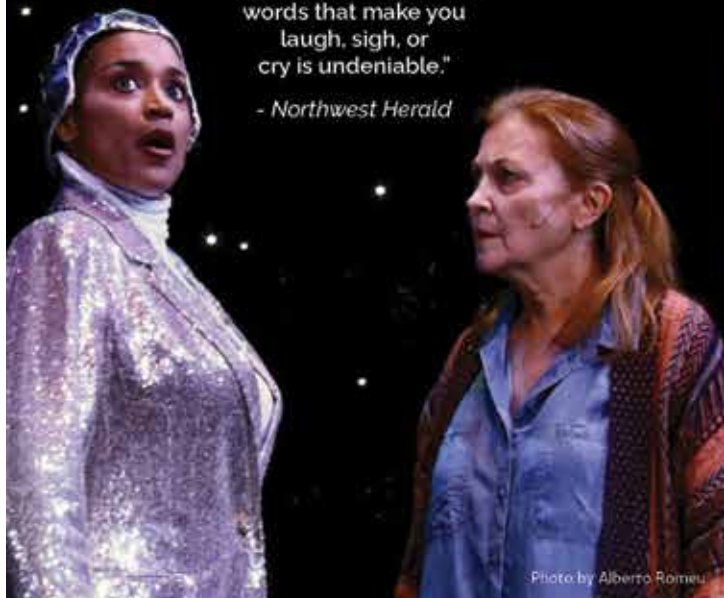


Photo by Alberto Romeu

making god laugh

Two generations. Four holidays.
Endless laughter.



"...such a moving and funny show that it would, indeed, make Him laugh."

- Chicago Sun-Times

Photo by Len Villano

the tin woman

Healing, family, and
second chances.

"Tears accompany the laughter... a play that reminded me of 'Ordinary People.'"

- Milwaukee Journal Sentinel



Photo by Len Villano

now and then

What would you say to your younger self?

"'Now and Then' explores roads taken and paths ignored"

- Miami Herald



Photo by Len Villano

by Sean Grennan

concord
theatricals



We Gather to Make Theatre *continued from page 38*

built with community support in 1998, expanded in 2006, and completely remodeled in 2022. We create theatre of our community and for our community.

What is the power of being a community theatre?

We run on love. For our recent production of *Sunday in the Park with George*, a local artist volunteered to paint six original canvases inspired by Georges Seurat's style. Our set designer painted two large faux prosceniums, dot-by-dot, to emulate pointillism. Our dramaturg sent weekly emails to the cast about Seurat's life and work. The list goes on. That kind of devotion can't be bought.

What do you see as the future of community theatre?

Theatre is storytelling at its best. In this increasingly digital age, I believe people long even more for the experience of gathering in one place and sharing a story. The future of live theatre is bright.

Kristy Meanor, Artistic Director

Wetumpka Depot Players | Wetumpka, Alabama

How did you begin?

We were born from a church youth group that staged a fundraising performance in 1980 to support a mission trip. By 1982, the group was producing multiple shows each year. The vision quickly expanded beyond those roots to include community members of all ages and backgrounds—and that spirit remains at the heart of who we are.

What is the most powerful story you can tell about community theatre?

We've had the honor of advancing three productions to the national level through AACTFest. Each time we faced the challenge of funding the journey, our community rallied. Individuals, businesses, civic groups. They invested because they saw their friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors on the national stage. They weren't just supporting a theatre company. They were supporting their community.

What else would you like readers to know?

Community theatre is often measured by its productions, but its greatest impact happens offstage. It's where an artist in our Penguin Project finds confidence. Where a child in our youth programs grows up to study theatre in college. Where a retiree discovers new purpose with our Encore Players. Where a family new to town finds lifelong friends. Its true success is found in the lives it changes.

JP Haynie, Artistic Director

Macon Little Theatre | Macon, Georgia

How do you define yourselves as a community theatre?

Macon Little Theatre was founded in 1934—the oldest continually operating community theatre in our area. While we appreciate that tradition, our mission is to adapt and evolve with our audience. We want to be a home for all of middle Georgia, diversifying our offerings to serve both traditional audiences and newer patrons and young performers.

What does your season say about the power of community theatre?

The same patron can come see a fully student production of *High School Musical*, get wild at an evening showing of *Rocky Horror*, see an original play by a Macon-born playwright, and enjoy a classic like *The Wizard of Oz*—all in the same season. We have the freedom to tell a wide range of stories, and that freedom is itself a statement about what community means.

What do you see ahead?

Life is expensive, and post-Covid, people think differently about their free time. Convincing someone to spend money and leave their house is already a challenge. But community theatre may be where theatre gets elevated precisely because it is decentralized from the biggest markets. Why travel to Atlanta for a \$100 ticket when you can take a family of four to your local theatre for less? If the quality is there, people will choose local.



Theatre Salina

Michael Spicer, Executive Director

Theatre Salina | Salina, Kansas

How do you identify yourselves?

Founded in 1960, we consider ourselves the regional theatre for western and north central Kansas—the only organization offering this level of quality programming and arts education between Topeka and Denver.

What stories stay with you?

There are new ones every year. The doctor who pleaded to let him bring an ill grandmother to a rehearsal of *Peter Pan* so she could see her grandson on stage before she passed—and who brought his own medical team to ensure her safety. She stayed for the entire rehearsal. The aunt who thanked us for “saving her niece’s life by giving her a place to grow up.” The patron who came to us in tears when we were finally able to perform during Covid, saying: “I’ll take care of my body. You take care of my heart.”

Community theatre will always exist in many forms, from small passion-driven groups to fully realized professionally managed organizations. But what it does—what it has always done—is provide a place where people belong.

Michael Fox, Vice President & Chief Operations Officer

Hale Centre Theatre | Sandy, Utah

You’re unusual—a for-profit theatre that calls itself a “community theatre.”



Finding Neverland at Hale Centre Theatre in Sandy, Utah

We were founded as a for-profit community theatre in 1985, building on a family tradition dating to 1947. We moved to a nonprofit model in 1997 to begin paying performers. Today we are proud to say every employee at Hale Centre Theatre is paid at or above the national average for their job title, from ushers through executives. We consider ourselves professional theatre.

So why keep the “community” label?

Because more than 90% of our artisans and performers—across every discipline—are drawn from the local community, rather than acquired from New York or Los Angeles. Our product is created by the community. That’s what the label means to me. Others on my team see it differently; they feel the word carries baggage that keeps influential community members from attending. It’s a debate we’re still having.

What does the future look like?

The lines we used to draw will continue to blur. Thirty years ago we knew what “community” theatre was versus “professional.” Many groups—including Hale Centre Theatre—are making those distinctions harder to define. As with individuals, organizations should be able to self-identify. The future of community theatre is one of varied definitions and varied levels of excellence.

Defining the Undefinable

The strategic planning sessions that AACT convened over the past year brought together some of the sharpest minds in the field—from theatres running on volunteer sweat and minimal budgets to organizations with hundreds of paid staff and millions in annual revenue. What they found was not *one* definition, but a *family* of them, bound by a set of shared values.

After much deliberation, AACT arrived at the following framework:

- Community theatre is theatre created by and for a specific community, rooted in local participation and shared ownership.
- 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.
- An organization may be considered a community theatre if it operates to serve a defined community rather

than a commercial market, engages local volunteers in artistic and production roles, and invites broad community access for participation and engagement.

“Professional theatre says, ‘we produce shows.’ Community theatre says, ‘we gather to make theatre.’”

Perhaps that distinction (“gathering” versus “producing”) is the truest measure of what community theatre has always been. From that army surplus parachute in Cottage Grove to the packed house in Wetumpka, to the grandmother at a *Peter Pan* rehearsal in Salina, what these theatres share is not a budget size or a paid or unpaid status or a building. What they share is the act of coming together.

In a world that can feel increasingly fragmented, that act is not incidental. It is essential.



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The Growing Movement to Prescribe the Arts, Part 2

Lou Ursone

In our last issue (Summer 2026) we highlighted the concept of Social Prescribing—a variety of programs built around the concept that the arts can play a major role in human well-being. Over the past few years, several organizations across the United States have joined other countries around the world in using it to help those struggling with mental health, social isolation, and loneliness, by connecting them to local art, culture, nature, movement, and other community experiences.

Recently, Florida and Washington have joined Arizona, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, and Wisconsin as states with organized social prescribing projects.

Atlanta-based SocialRx (formerly Art Pharmacy) has been a key player in this area. Offering custom-built technology to personalize social prescribing services, it works with healthcare, university, corporate, and government partners to address loneliness and mental health across the U.S. Importantly, its tools include artistic, cultural, movement, and nature-based experiences with preventative and therapeutic value.

One example is Urban Health Plan (UHP), a nationally recognized Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) and leader in community-based care, that has partnered with SocialRx to expand access to social prescribing services for patients in New York City, working directly for whole-person care for underserved communities.

Building Statewide Partnerships Through the Arts

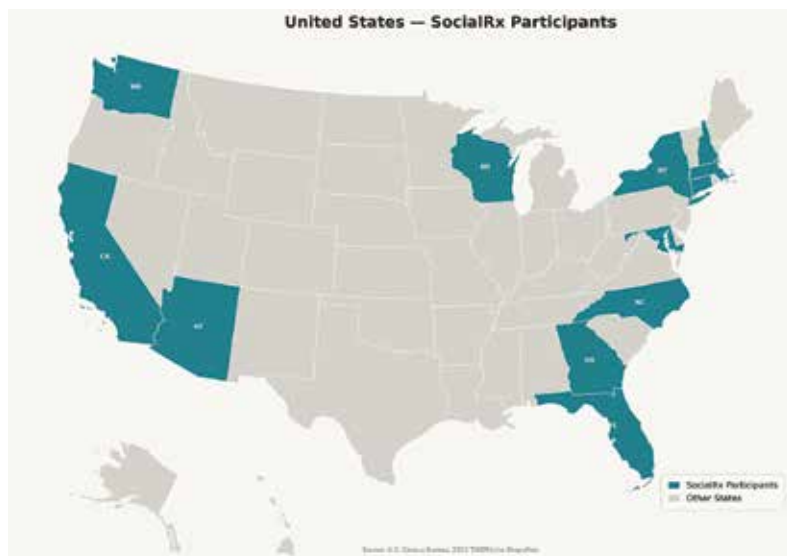
One of the first AACT members to get involved in social prescribing is Allen Ebert, Executive Director, Children's Theatre of Madison, Wisconsin, who also serves on the AACT Board of Directors. As a member of the Wisconsin steering committee to launch SocialRx, he has been working diligently over the past few years to bring the program online through partnering with the Wisconsin Arts Board, Dane Arts, and others.

“Everything that they do is based on empirical evidence.”

“One example is that a patient is given a prescription for 12 doses (one per month) to attend a cultural activity with a companion,” Allen said. “Along the way, like when trying any new prescription, the patient is evaluated. The health system may suggest more of the same or try something different, based on the patient's needs.”

“The program is all about partnerships,” Allen added. “We can eventually help those who would not normally have access to theatre and other art forms, to find ways to better health through participation in a wide range of art disciplines.”

He described how Michael Bobbitt, former executive director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, was part of the first state in the nation to have a statewide social prescription program. Allen notes that social prescribing, while new in the US, has been used in other parts of the world for many years, and that Massachusetts has done very well with its launch.



Elizabeth Shapiro, Director of Arts, Preservation, and Museums in the State of Connecticut's Department of Economic and Community Development, also learned about SocialRx through Bobbitt, and was quick to join in.

Noting her competitive nature, she believed that if Massachusetts could do this, she could surely make it happen in a smaller state like Connecticut, so she reached out to the leaders at SocialRx, and was truly impressed.

“Everything that they do is based on empirical evidence,” she said. “They are essentially a health company that uses the arts as their primary method of treatment,” adding, “I think this will help not only the people of Connecticut, but it will also help artists and arts organizations be able to make the case that what they do has empirical effects on peoples' wellness overall—and in particular, as it relates to loneliness and social isolation, and other mental health intersections.”

Connecticut has over 150 arts organizations and artists who are approved partners that can give care through their arts pro-

grams, she explained. The state has four health centers currently involved, and she hopes to see many more in the future.

Additionally, for the last two years the National Endowment for the Arts has offered up to \$75,000 to state arts agencies for arts and health programs without any real guidelines or restrictions on how to use the funds. Connecticut has thus used some of those funds to pay for participation with SocialRx. If the same funds are available next year, the state hopes to follow the lead of its Massachusetts colleagues and seed three community health centers with \$25,000 grants to help each enroll in SocialRx.

How Arts Organizations Can Get Involved

How is this all paid for and what does it mean to theatres and other arts organizations? Adrienne Hundley, Head of Community Strategy at SocialRx, explains: “The answer is in all of the ways that health care is paid for in the U.S. Through insurance partnerships, through health partners, contracts with health systems, through public health dollars, and through some private support.”

I believe the best thing that we as arts leaders can do right now—whether or not we’re in a state that is already established—is to join the SocialRx network of community partners (I already have). As Adrienne explains, it helps make the case to health care providers and other social service agencies that there is capacity and interest from communities for this type of work.

And, as Allen Ebert points out, arts organizations also gain participants who may not have had previous access to them.

If you would like to know more about SocialRx and social prescribing, visit the company’s website at socialrx.com. If you’d like to go further, they will put you in touch with leaders in your community who may already be part of the process, or help you start the ball rolling where you live. You’ll also find links to some of the supportive data and books on the arts and health in the box below.

[If you missed the first of these two articles, our Summer issue is available online at aact.org/spotlight]

Books about the intersection of health and the arts include:

- *Art Cure: The Science of How the Arts Save Lives*, by Daisy Fancourt (Celadon Books, 2026)
- *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us*, by Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross (Random House, 2023)
- *The Connection Cure: The Prescriptive Power of Movement, Nature, Art, Service, and Belonging*, by Julia Hotz (Simon & Schuster, 2024)

Online resources include:

- *Social Prescribing Around the World*: A report from the National Academy of Social Prescribing and the World Health Organization: aact.org/rx01
- Georgia Legislative Resolution recognizing the impact of arts on mental health: aact.org/rx02
- Social Prescribing in the EU—a five-year program: aact.org/rx03
- Social Prescribing in the UK: aact.org/rx04



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



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Michelle Swink

When community theatres talk about inclusivity, the conversation often centers around who is represented onstage. Just as important, though, is who feels welcome in our rehearsal halls, workshops, volunteer crews, board rooms, and audiences.

Veterans are part of every community. Yet many theatres may not realize how much they have in common with the people who have served in the military, or how meaningful creative spaces can be for Veterans looking for connection, purpose, and belonging after service.

For Nicole Poole, Executive Director of SPARK! Creative Lab in Oklahoma City, that realization began with one man's story.



Scott Reed

Chloe Jensen, Natasha Abu Fadel, Brianna McKinley, Paige Fischer, Nathaniel Tylor, Hui Cha Poos, Neil Chapman (USAF Veteran), James Metcalfe, Angel Little (US Navy Veteran), Ryan Johnson, Tony Tee, Kiona Wooton Millirons, Ian Cummings, Nicole Poole, and Zachary Burns.

Listening to One Veteran's Story

Nicole never set out to create a Veteran-focused arts organization. Instead, she found herself listening to Air Force Veteran Dr. Neil Chapman and learning about his experiences as a Morse code interceptor during the Vietnam War. That conversation eventually led to *Ditty Bops: The Art of Listening*, a multidisciplinary project that brought Chapman's story to the stage and opened unexpected doors for the organization.

"The honest answer is Neil," Nicole said when asked what first inspired SPARK!'s work with Veterans. "I did not begin SPARK! thinking, 'We are going to become a Veteran-serving arts organization.' I began as an artist trying to listen well to the person in front of me."

That commitment to listening ultimately transformed SPARK!'s work. Today, Veterans are involved throughout the organization as artists, facilitators, storytellers, leaders, and collaborators. They are not simply participants in SPARK!'s work; they help shape it.

Finding Connection, Purpose, and Belonging

What Nicole discovered along the way is that theatre and military service share more common ground than many people realize.

"Theatre, and really any collaborative art, is built on many of the same things Veterans understand deeply: ensemble, trust, timing, awareness, adaptability, presence, and mission."

Anyone who has ever worked backstage, managed a production schedule, built a set, or stepped onto a stage knows how much a successful production depends on teamwork. Everyone has a role. Everyone contributes to something larger than themselves.

That sense of shared purpose can be especially meaningful for Veterans transitioning from military life into civilian communities.

"Loneliness and disconnection are real issues for many Veterans, especially after leaving a structure where identity, purpose, and belonging are built into daily life," Nicole explained. "Creative programs can offer a low-pressure way to reconnect with the world."

At SPARK!, Veterans consistently report finding connection, creative outlets, confidence, emotional relief, and a renewed sense of belonging through participation in the arts.

Just as importantly, Nicole says the work helps challenge common assumptions about Veterans. "Too often, Veterans are framed only through service, sacrifice, trauma, or need," she said. "Those things may be part of the story, but they are not the whole story."

Community theatres are uniquely positioned to help tell that fuller story.

Moving Beyond Recognition to Real Inclusion

The good news is that meaningful inclusion does not require a large budget or a major new program. According to Nicole, it often starts with something much simpler: relationships.

"If you are not a Veteran yourself, educate yourself and your team on basic military cultural competency," she said. "Then look at your actual behavior as an organization."

She encourages theatres to ask themselves important questions. Do Veterans already participate in your organization? Are they visible only around Veterans Day? Have you built relationships with Veteran-serving organizations in your community? Are military families part of your audience, volunteer base, or leadership?

Most importantly, she encourages theatres to listen before launching new initiatives.

"The goal should not be, 'How do we get Veterans into our programming?'" Nicole said. "The better question is, 'How can our theatre become a place where Veterans feel genuinely welcome, valued, and connected?'"

She also offers a reminder that many organizations need to hear.

"A free ticket on Veterans Day is not a relationship. A patriotic curtain speech is not inclusion."

That shift in perspective can make all the difference.

Nicole also cautions against assuming Veterans

fit a single mold. Veterans come from every background and every walk of life. Their experiences vary widely, and not everyone wants to engage with the arts in the same way.

Some may be drawn to acting. Others may find their place in lighting, sound, costumes, construction, writing, music, front-of-house operations, or community events. Some may simply need time to get comfortable before deciding how they want to participate.



Clockwise from left: Chad Chappelle (US Navy Veteran), James Kloeppel (US Navy Veteran), Nicole Poole, Darrell Watts (USAF Veteran), Rhonda Spencer, and Ella Jefferson Speed (US Army Veteran).

"Veterans are not a monolith," Nicole said. "That includes women Veterans, who are too often treated as adjacent to the story rather than central to it. The key is to stop deciding ahead of time who Veterans are supposed to be in our spaces and make enough room for the whole person to show up."

As theatres look toward Veterans Day programming and recognition events later this year, Nicole hopes organizations will think beyond a single annual celebration.

"Do not just thank Veterans. Make room for them."

It is a simple statement, but perhaps one of the most important lessons community theatres can take away.

Theatre has always been about bringing people together. It creates opportunities to listen, collaborate, imagine, and belong. Those are things every community needs, and they are often exactly what Veterans are seeking when they walk through our doors.

Zachary Burns



After performances of *Ditty Bops: The Art of Listening in 2023*, audience members signed letters to elected officials advocating for action on the VA claims backlog.

As Nicole puts it, "Veterans bring the mission. Artists bring the medium. Together, we can build something deeply human."

Editor's Note: Read our extended online feature for additional insights from Nicole Poole, including practical ways theatres can build meaningful relationships with Veterans, stories from Veterans involved with SPARK! Creative Lab, and advice for creating more welcoming and inclusive creative spaces: aact.org/veterans



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Lou Ursone

Camille Cline

How does a Harrisonburg, Virginia, ninth-grade ensemble member of *Damn Yankees* become a highly respected and incredibly successful nonprofit fundraiser? Read on to learn about Camille Cline's journey.



Speaking about that youthful production, Camille said, "What was phenomenal for me was seeing, in rehearsal and backstage, just the incredible talent of people who really can perform," noting that she was their number-one fan. "To this day, I'm still the number-one fan of the arts and my colleagues at Venice Theatre," she added.

It was at Venice Theatre where Camille first heard staff members talking about AACT. She quickly learned that, in her words, "AACT is the glue that keeps community theatres together." In her role as Chief Advancement Officer, Camille's fundraising skills have helped bond the right people together in order to help raise the \$25M needed for repairing their hurricane-damaged building.

Camille's experience at the biennial AACT National Director's Conference was eye-opening. "Meeting fun, engaging, passionate people with years in the field is what I bring back to my work at Venice Theatre," she said.

One thing many of us in the arts have learned is that exposure to live theatre (and other cultural activities) needs to start at a young age in order for it to become a life-long habit. Luckily for Camille, she was introduced to some of the best theatre in the

world at a young age, both on Broadway and at The Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.

After graduation from the University of Virginia (UVA), Camille began her career as an editor at *PC Magazine* in New York City, a career that she stayed with through moves to Dallas and back, eventually returning to UVA. She even created her own company, The Literary Spa, as a way of not just editing, but nurturing authors. "Authors and artists are my heroes—they're my role models," she said. "The work that they have to do to hone their craft—I'm in awe of it."

Her early UVA volunteer efforts, working with alumni, paved the way to her first role in the development field. With Florida as her territory of alums to work with, Camille was able to move there, allowing her to raise her children near their grandparents. "I really love my parents and wanted my kids to know them," she said.

Camille soon began volunteering at the Venice Library, eventually becoming its chief development officer. There she raised the necessary funds to get the library out of its temporary quarters and into their permanent home. That job introduced her to Venice Theatre's current Executive Director, Kristofer Geddie, who was instrumental in her move to the theatre's staff.

That temporary library space is now Venice Theatre's Raymond Center. "I was fundraising to get the library out of that building, then fundraising to get Venice Theatre into it," she joked. By the time the renovations to the Raymond Center are complete in 2029, Camille will have spent the better part of 10 years working on projects related to that building.

"AACT has been very important to my work at Venice Theatre," Camille said. "It keeps people informed, connected. It provides statistics that help me benchmark where we are in Venice," she added. "Sharing best practices and codifying best practices so people don't have to reinvent the wheel each time, is something that AACT does very well," Camille noted.

Her modesty around the success of raising millions of dollars over the years is staggering. "I found out I'm not too shabby in the fundraising and engagement world. It's just storytelling," she said.

Ana Van Hoven

Up to now, it has been AACT who has reached out, asking members to share their stories here. Recently, however, one of our members reached out to *us*, expressing gratitude for the support she and her theatre have received from AACT.

Ana M. Van Hoven is Executive Director (Directora Ejecutiva) of Teatro de las Américas, in Oxnard, California. We were deeply touched by her words, and wanted to share them with our readers.

"As a Spanish language theatre in the AACT family, we often feel like a small but steady light in a wide constellation of community theatres," she writes. "And yet, through AACT's con-

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ferences, roundtables, and educational resources, that light has grown brighter, steadier, and more confident. Your leadership has created a space where theatres of every size, language, and geography can learn, grow, and feel seen.



“For us, AACT has become more than a membership. It has become a classroom, a source of mentorship, and a place where we rediscover possibility. The National Directors Conference, in particular, has been transformative, a reminder that imagination is a discipline and that leadership is an art.

“Thank you for the work you do, for the community you nurture, and for the generosity with which you guide this national network. We are proud to be part of AACT and grateful for the ways it continues to shape our journey.

“We are working steadily toward bigger, deeper programming, work that reflects the growth AACT has helped nurture in us. Every conference, every roundtable, every shared resource becomes another stone in the path we are laying toward a stronger, more expansive Teatro de las Américas.”

All of us at AACT are grateful to hear how our organization—and fellow member theatres—have helped Teatro de las Américas. It’s a wonderful affirmation that we are, in fact, helping theatres thrive.

Following up with Ana after she sent her heartfelt email, we asked a few more questions regarding their involvement with AACT. Here are her responses:

• Why did you decide to join AACT?

I joined AACT because I believe deeply in the power of community theatre to transform lives. I wanted to be part of a national community that supports storytelling, inclusion, and artistic growth, especially for organizations like ours that center Spanish-language and bilingual work.

• Which programs have you found most beneficial or enjoyable?

I’ve found AACT’s conferences to be incredibly valuable; they’re truly stellar. The sessions offer practical professional development I can apply immediately in my work at Teatro, and the presenters always bring insight that strengthens how we operate. I also appreciate the organizational tools and resources AACT provides; even when I’m not attending a conference, those materials help improve our planning, governance, and day-to-day operations.

• What advice or feedback can you offer for getting the most out of your membership?

Use the membership to strengthen your board and staff. Sharing AACT materials with your team helps everyone grow together.

• And is there anything else you’d like to add?

I’m grateful for the space AACT creates for community theatres of all sizes and backgrounds. Organizations like Teatro, bilingual, multicultural, and community-rooted, benefit tremendously from being part of this network.



NEWS FROM THE MID-SOUTH

REGIONALLY SPEAKING

Region IVa Update

Lynn Nelson, Region IVa Representative

Theatre is alive and thriving in AACT Region IVa (comprised of Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia). Since interest in participating in the festival process waned during Covid, we have been busy promoting the benefits of participation for our theatres. Kentucky forwarded a production to the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) festival for the first time in several years. West Virginia has revived their participation, as well, holding a state festival for the last two years and sending two shows to SETC this past March. Mississippi also held its state festival in January and sent two shows to SETC.

SETC had a very full festival schedule in March at the wonderful Chattanooga Theatre Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Nine theatres participated and participants came from Florida, Kentucky, West Virginia, Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama. The two winning productions were *The Revolutionists* from Starkville, Mississippi, and *Laundry & Bourbon* from Wetumpka, Alabama.

Participation in the festival process is one of the very best ways a theatre can improve and grow. But it can be expensive for a company to participate, and sometimes it’s hard to see immediate

return on investment. Participants in this year’s process received invaluable feedback at both the state and regional levels. Both Starkville and Wetumpka have been active participants for many years and can attest to how it has helped them improve production values, market themselves to a wider audience, and grow their patron base.

In other news, Cazateatro from Memphis, Tennessee, was invited to participate in aactWORLDfest this past June. Founded in 2006, they are the only bilingual theatre group in Tennessee and started participating in the festival process two years ago. They represented our region so very well, and we’re so proud of them!

It’s pretty evident that, as we say here in the south, “theatre is alive and kicking” in Region IVa!

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. For a map of the 11 Regions and contact information for the Region Representatives, visit aact.org/regs

Crossword

Lynn Nelson

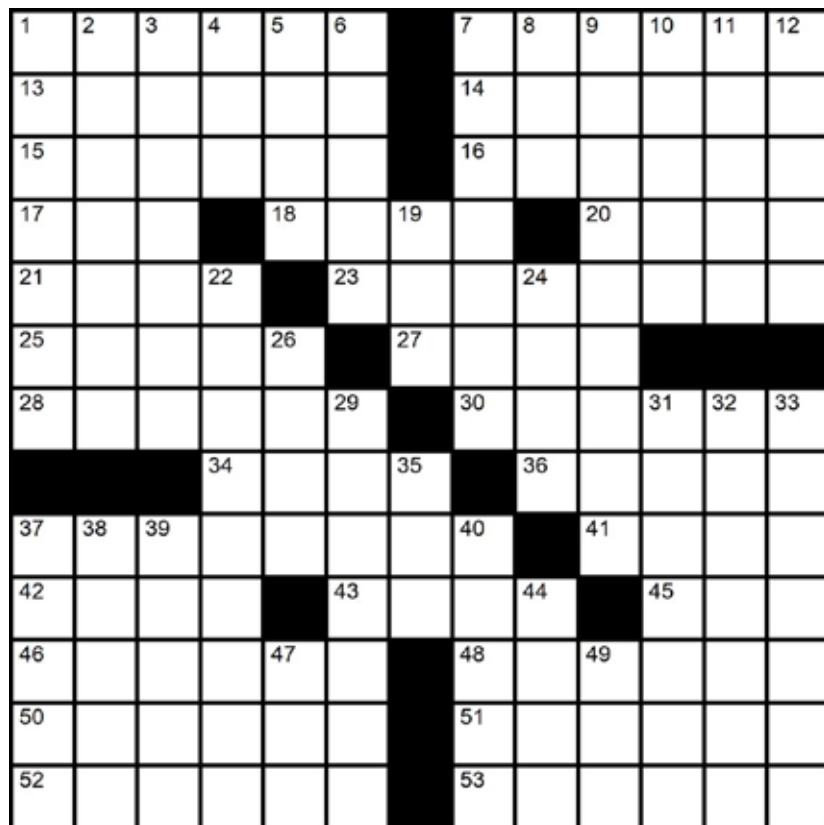
Across

1. Late August playwright
7. Cosmetics
13. Marine life conservation organization
14. Feeling of discomfort or anxiety
15. Narrated again
16. Mall figures in red suits
17. Drunk driving charge, for short
18. Abominable Snowman
20. Dryer trap accumulation
21. Digital Action Tracking System
23. Post-election tallies
25. Korbut and Kurylenko, etc.
27. Southern biscuit ingredient
28. Leachman in *Young Frankenstein*
30. Permitted by statute
34. One who causes to mature
36. Tropical climbing vine
37. Hosiery worn by Cabaret dancers
41. Color between black and white
42. Tingling-sensation-inducing online content, briefly
43. Feline utterance
45. Wonder and reverence
46. Women's button-up top
48. Before the conflict
50. Woodworking machines
51. Capital of Zimbabwe
52. Lace-like cotton fabric
53. Fixed at the vet's office

Down

1. Common file in Microsoft's suite
2. Frozen barrier
3. Elsa's signature *Frozen* song

Playfulness with Playwrights



4. ____ Paulo
5. Solely
6. Consumer advocate Ralph
7. *Hamilton* for one
8. Collection of someone's memorable quotes
9. Playwright for *Lend Me a Tenor*
10. Dine at home rather than order out
11. University of Saint Anthony
12. Termites and cockroaches
19. ____ Aviv
22. Playwright of *In the Next Room*
24. Spoken, not written
26. Omen
29. Appearest, in archaic speech

31. Distant and remote
32. Not cognizant
33. Built up in strata
35. Hwy. alternative
37. Aesop's tale
38. Scottish island known for peaty whiskies
39. Struck down with great force
40. Second-year students, informally
44. Sandwich alternative with a tortilla
47. Holy ____
49. Historical period

Crossword answers are available online:
aact.org/puzzle



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PUPPET CONSTRUCTION

TECH
TALK

David A. VanCleave

Working in community theatre often includes learning a new skill for the betterment of the production. Actors learn new dialects, dancers learn to tap, and sometimes, middle school teachers learn how to design and construct puppets.

Allison Carter from Valparaiso, Indiana, did just that several years ago and has since built puppets for a range of productions, from Disney's *The Lion King JR.* at her school to Memorial Opera House's recent Penguin Project production of Disney's *Finding Nemo JR.*

"About 10 years ago, we were doing George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and I thought it would be really fun if the kids made their own goblin puppets," Carter explained. "So I found some resources, but it was a little too advanced for the students, so I had to pivot.

"When Covid hit, I really wanted to do a show, but we had all these parameters, so once again, I turned to puppets," she explained. "So we did an all-puppet *Seussical*. All the performers could be masked and remain six feet apart, but use the puppets without any contact with each other. That was the show that really kind of made me super interested in puppets."



A scene from *The Penguin Project's* production of *Finding Nemo JR.* at Memorial Opera House in Valparaiso, Indiana

Carter credits Adam Kreutinger's Puppet Nerd (puppetnerd.com) for her success and passion. Sadly, Kreutinger passed away last year, but his content remains available.

"He has a website, YouTube channel, Instagram... everything," Carter noted. "He was incredibly generous with his time and resources, including free patterns, tutorials, etc. It is the place to go for anyone who wants to learn Henson-style puppetry."

Kreutinger also designed for community and regional productions. While most of the resources are for hand puppets, his content includes tutorials for everything from rods and trigger mechanisms to Audrey II.

For those beginning their puppet journey, Carter stresses the importance of starting early. "It starts to become a bit more intuitive the more you do it. Inevitably, something won't work the first time. Giving yourself time to pivot or troubleshoot pattern drafting is essential."

Patience is key throughout the entire process. "You are going to want to move through the gluing phase very quickly; don't. If you really take your time on the gluing and foam, everything else tends to work out pretty well. So be patient on your skeleton, your base, whatever your



Mentors and Artists present puppets from *The Penguin Project's* recent production of *Finding Nemo JR.*

form is. Then it is very doable," Carter said. "And trust me, seeing the artists' faces light up when they see their puppet is worth it."

About Allison

Allison Carter graduated with a degree in English Secondary Education and a minor in Theater from Saint Joseph's College (Rensselaer, Indiana) in 2004. She has worked as a director in youth theatre for over 20 years and served as a mentor and costume designer for Penguin programming in Valparaiso, Indiana, for the past year.

DAVID LYNCH KYLE MACLACHLAN CATHERINE COULSON

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SCRIPTS, RIGHTS, & ROYALTIES

RESOURCE
CENTER

Stephen Peithman

Choosing a play or musical to produce can be straightforward or tricky—and even more so when it comes to securing performance rights.

The good news is that reliable guidance is available online—if you know where to look. We’ve listed some of the best of these resources below, each with a shortened link that will take you directly to the topic-specific page.

And, since these resources work best when you fully understand the rights and royalties process, we’ve also included some basics, as well.

Finding Plays Online

Whether you’re looking for a particular title or simply exploring the possibilities, start with the resources on AACT’s website. (* below means you must be signed in to view)

- **PlayFinder.** AACT’s Google-based feature lets you search for a play or musical by title, to find where to get scripts and/or licensing information. aact.org/sources
- **Play Sources.** This alphabetical list of publishers/licensing companies provides addresses, websites, and full contact information. aact.org/sources
- **Play Directory.*** Our searchable hub connects you with AACT-member playwrights. Search using a wide variety of criteria (including genre, cast size, and theme) to find the ideal script for your casting and artistic needs. aact.org/play-search
- **Theatre Production Hits & Misses.*** Here you’ll find an alphabetical listing of plays and musicals produced by AACT member companies—who rate each title with a financial success rating from 1-5, and provide comments. This data can be invaluable when you’re planning a season. (*All member companies are encouraged to add their own productions and ratings to keep this database as current as possible.*) aact.org/hits-misses
- **AACT NewPlayFest Anthologies.** NewPlayFest is a national program for playwrights, to submit new scripts for review, with winners produced by an AACT member theatre. Winning plays are published in anthologies by Dramatic Publishing Company, displayed on our website, with links to each. aact.org/anthologies

Rights & Royalties

Definitions

- *Theatrical licensing* is the legal process of obtaining permission (the “rights”) to produce a copyrighted play or musical in front of an audience—whether or not admission is charged.
- *Royalties* are usually charged based on (1) the particular title you want, (2) where and when it will be produced, (3) the number of performances, and (4) the prices charged for admission. (Free or “pay what you can” performances, as well as previews, still require royalty payments, although they cost less than paid performances.)

The Basics

Some important things to keep in mind:

- Plays and musicals protected by copyright may be produced *only* with the permission of the rights holder or their representative. Classics written before 1900 (Shakespeare, Ibsen, Gilbert & Sullivan) are no longer protected by copyright if you are using the *original* script. However, a modern translation of a Greek tragedy or an Ibsen drama is subject to copyright, even though the original is in the public domain.
- Not every title in a licensing company’s catalog may be licensed in the same way. For example, some titles may not be currently

available in your part of the country (often due to touring productions). The catalog often includes licensing information as part of a title’s descriptive information, but your licensing company representative can help with any questions.

- In addition, musicals typically require separate rental charges for scripts and music.
- Billing credit for authors must be included in programs, posters, and advertisements *exactly as specified* in the license.
- With most titles, you are not allowed to alter scripts, music, or lyrics (including changing characters’ genders or song order) without written permission.
- Most standard licenses do not allow video or audio recording of a performance, and additional licenses are typically required if you plan to stream or record a production.

In most cases, you’ll want to begin the process of securing rights at least a year before the show is to open (possibly earlier with some high-demand shows). Licensing can take time, and if you’re turned down for any reason, you’ll still have time to come up with a plan B.

Finally, many licensing companies offer discounts to AACT member companies. You’ll find the current listing on our Discounts and Special Offers page: aact.org/discounts

Rights & Royalties Resources

Because details vary widely, there is no one-stop shop for information on rights and royalties. But there is good information out there you can tap, when you need it.

AACT Website

On the main menu, under Resources/Making Theatre, click on “Rights & Royalties.” Here you’ll find an explanation of copyright law, as well as links to detailed help and guidance on related pages:

- The “Obtaining Rights” page includes “6 Steps to Obtain Production Rights,” plus links to AACT Copyright & Royalty Resources, our Glossary of Rights & Royalty Terms (PDF), and articles on making script changes and videotaping productions. aact.org/rights2
- The “Copyright & Royalty Resources” page includes links to helpful articles on the web, including “Copyright 101” (Dramatists Guild), “A Copyright Crash Course” (University of Texas at Austin), “Copyright Basics” (Library of Congress), “Don’t Change The Words” (Dramatists Guild), and “What’s Copyright Got to Do, Got to Do With It?” (Harvard Law School Journal of Sports & Entertainment Law), and more. aact.org/rights3
- AACT’s member-only Resource Library offers articles under “Rights & Royalties,” including: “Working with Publishers & Agents,” “Cutting a Script—Legally,” “Rights for ‘Pay What You Will’ Performances,” and “Devised (Collaborative) Theatre Productions,” among others. (You must be signed in to view.) aact.org/library

Always Go to the Source

It’s unfortunate, but true, that there is a lot of misinformation in circulation about rights and royalties. *Our advice:* Don’t assume anything. And do your research.

When it comes to obtaining rights and determining royalties, it’s important to know that policies can vary considerably, even when the shows are offered by the same licensing company. One reason is that the playwright or rights holder can dictate certain elements in how they want their work to be performed. Another is that in-demand titles typically have higher royalties than less performed ones. However, some things are pretty much universal—in almost all cases, script changes must be

approved by the rights holder, for example. And royalties are typically due for any performance for an audience, whether they pay or not.

So, to be sure about what you can do with any particular play or musical, go to the source.

Start Here

Licensing companies provide a great deal of important information on their websites. Below are links to the major licensing companies, but others can be found on AACT's Play Sources page (linked above), including contact information and links to their websites.

- Concord Theatricals (Broadway Licensing Global, Concord, Dramatists Play Service, Playscripts, Samuel French, Tams) aact.org/rights4
- Disney Theatrical aact.org/rights5
- Dramatic Publishing aact.org/rights6
- Heuer Publishing aact.org/rights7
- Music Theatre International aact.org/rights8 (also check out their "Do's and Don'ts of Licensing") aact.org/rights9
- Pioneer Drama Service aact.org/rights10
- Theatrical Rights Worldwide aact.org/rights11

Deeper Dives for Playwrights

- Dramatists Guild: "Commissions, Advances, Per Diem, Royalties" aact.org/rights12
- The Playwrights Realm: "The Ins and Outs of Playwright Contracts" aact.org/rights13

Using Copyright-Protected Music

ASCAP and BMI standard licenses

These general licenses—including the Community Theatre licenses offered through AACT—cover copyrighted pre-show, intermission, and

post-show music played by means other than live performers. aact.org/membership

However, general licenses do *not* cover recorded music used *during* a play (this includes music during, or leading into or out of, an act or scene), or music performed live, such as in a musical revue or by a jazz combo performing during a gala reception. For these, you must contact ASCAP or BMI directly for licensing information on particular songs or works.

- ASCAP: aact.org/rights14
- BMI: aact.org/rights15

Generally speaking, revues or concerts may include no more than three songs from any one musical—as long as the performance is presented without dialogue, costumes, or props. The ASCAP or BMI representative can explain what is permitted for the musical numbers you want to perform.

- Songs/composers represented by ASCAP can be found through its Repertory Search page. aact.org/rights16
- Those represented by BMI can be found through its Songview search app. aact.org/rights17



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.



NEW ROLES

Chelsea Haaland



The Des Moines Community Playhouse in Des Moines, Iowa, has welcomed Chelsea Haaland as its new Executive Director. She joins Artistic Director Katy Merriman on the theatre's leadership team.

Chelsea is an award-winning teaching artist, director, and performer with numerous directing, stage managing, and performance credits at venues around the state.

"We are thrilled to welcome Chelsea as our Executive Director," said Colleen Powell, Playhouse board president. "She has a 15-year history with The Playhouse as a director, teaching artist, performer, stage manager, and theatre education intern, meaning she understands the soul of this theatre. She is also a visionary, nationally recognized arts leader. Chelsea's proven ability to manage massive creative teams and champion inclusive, award-winning programming will ensure The Playhouse continues to set the standard for artistic and operational excellence."

"The Playhouse is more than a physical space; it has built a legacy as a cornerstone of arts and culture in Iowa because of the many volunteers and staff members who devote countless hours to shared goals," Chelsea said. "It will be my highest responsibility to partner with the volunteers, the patrons, the staff, and the board to refine and maintain the conditions that allow The Playhouse's people to continue doing their best. This is, in fact, what I am most excited about: collaborating with great people to promote art and stories, creating positive experiences, and championing The Playhouse as the community's standard for artistic excellence, high-quality education and training, and inclusive practices."

Kevin Johnson-Sather



The Omaha Community Playhouse is pleased to announce the appointment of Kevin Johnson-Sather as its new Executive Director, effective August 3, 2026. Following a national search, Johnson-Sather will lead the century-old organization and a long-standing pillar of the arts in Omaha and throughout Nebraska.

"I am delighted to welcome Kevin Johnson-Sather to the Omaha Community Playhouse," said Tim Jeffrey, President, Omaha Community Playhouse Board of Directors. "Kevin brings a strong combination of artistic vision, operational expertise, and financial discipline, along with a thoughtful and people-centered approach to leadership. He is a leader who will strengthen connections across the organization while advancing OCP's mission in meaningful ways."

"I am deeply honored to join the Omaha Community Playhouse as the next Executive Director and to help lead this extraordinary institution into its second century. My own journey in the arts began in community theater, and throughout my career, I have been committed to creating opportunities for the arts to bring people together and transform lives both on and off the stage," said Johnson-Sather. "I look forward to working with the Board of Directors, Vincent Orduña, the talented staff, artists, volunteers, and the entire OCP community to build on the Playhouse's remarkable legacy while strengthening its financial and operational foundation to ensure it continues to be a place for creativity and connection for generations to come."

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Insurance Insights

Beyond the production: Managing volunteer risk and responsibility

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

From the box office to backstage, community theatres often rely on volunteers. They build sets, run lights, greet patrons, manage fundraising events, and often serve on boards that keep the organization moving forward.

This model is a strength, but it also introduces a distinct risk profile. When people generously give their time, organizations have a responsibility to ensure they're supported, protected, and working within a structure that helps reduce liability.

With the right balance of planning, training, and coverage, you can help protect both your volunteers and your organization.

What Could Go Wrong?

Because volunteers often take on a wide range of roles—sometimes without formal training—unexpected issues can arise:

- A volunteer falls from a ladder while helping construct a set.
- A front-of-house volunteer contributes to an injury while managing crowd flow.
- A miscommunication creates unsafe conditions during rehearsals.
- A fire starts backstage or in a storage area due to improperly stored paints or solvent-soaked rags.
- A board decision leads to a governance-related claim.

These situations aren't uncommon. The key is recognizing where exposure exists and taking steps to manage it proactively.

Key Risk Considerations for Volunteer-Driven Theatres

Understanding coverage gaps for volunteer injuries

Unlike employees, volunteers are not always covered by workers' compensation.

What this means:

- Injuries may not automatically be covered.
- Coverage can vary based on state requirements and insurance policy structure.
- Organizations may face out-of-pocket costs or reputational impact if protections fall short.

Two common coverage approaches:

- **Medical Payments Coverage (Med Pay):** Typically included in general liability policies, Med Pay can address smaller injuries regardless of fault. However, limits are often modest.
- **Volunteer Accident or Workers' Compensation Coverage:** Some organizations extend workers' comp (where permitted) or purchase volunteer accident policies for broader protection.

To help protect your team: Review your current policy with your broker or carrier to understand how volunteers are treated and whether additional coverage is needed.

Managing liability from volunteer actions

Volunteers often represent your organization publicly, and their actions can create liability exposure.

Examples:

- Directing patrons improperly during an emergency.
- Mishandling equipment.
- Providing inaccurate guidance that leads to harm.

In many cases, the organization can be held responsible for actions taken on its behalf.

Risk management essentials:

- Clearly define volunteer roles and responsibilities.
- Avoid assigning specialized tasks without proper qualifications.
- Maintain appropriate supervision, especially in higher-risk settings.

Improving Safety Through Training and Oversight

Consistent preparation and support can go a long way in helping to reduce risk.

Training

Even a basic orientation can make a meaningful impact:

- Safety protocols such as ladder use and equipment handling.
- Role-specific expectations.
- Clear escalation paths when issues arise.

Supervision

Volunteer-led does not mean unstructured:

- Assign experienced leads for key functions.
- Maintain oversight during rehearsals, builds, and performances.
- Keep communication clear and consistent.

Waivers and documentation

While not a replacement for insurance, documentation plays an important supporting role:

- Use volunteer agreements that outline expectations and risks.
- Document training and safety briefings.
- Track incidents and near misses to inform improvements.

Protecting Board Members and Organizational Leadership

Community theatres are often guided by volunteer boards whose decisions carry real responsibility.

Potential exposures include:

- Employment-related claims.
- Financial mismanagement allegations.
- Conflicts of interest or governance disputes.

Directors and Officers (D&O) insurance can help protect board members and leaders from claims tied to their decisions and oversight.

Why it matters:

- Leaders are often named individually in lawsuits.
- Strong protection supports recruitment and retention.
- It reinforces confidence in your governance practices.

A Practical Checklist for Volunteer Risk Management

Use this as a starting point to help strengthen your organization's approach to volunteer risk management:

Review your coverage

- Confirm how volunteers are addressed in liability and workers' compensation policies.
- Explore volunteer accident coverage if needed.
- Ensure D&O coverage is current.

Continued on page 54 ▷

Insurance Insights *continued from page 53*

Clarify roles and expectations

- Define responsibilities for each volunteer role.
- Limit access to higher-risk tasks without proper training.

Standardize training

- Conduct basic safety orientations.
- Provide role-specific instruction where needed.

Strengthen oversight

- Assign supervisors or team leads.
- Maintain visibility during higher-risk activities.

Document and improve

- Use volunteer agreements or waivers.
- Track incidents and refine processes over time.

Supporting Volunteers with Confidence

Volunteers bring each production to life through their time, talent, and commitment. Supporting their dedication means creating an environment where expectations are clear, preparation is consistent, and people feel confident in their roles.

When your organization takes a thoughtful approach to coverage, guidance, and oversight it can help strengthen both the volunteer experience and your ability to operate effectively.

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CALENDAR

Dates	Event	St	City	Phone	Website
Sept 4-6	Ohio Community Theatre Association State Festival	OH	Lima	740-403-8969	
Sept 12-13	New Hampshire State Festival	NH	Concord	603-521-4373	concordnh.gov/722/Audi
October	AACT NewPlayFest Premiere: <i>Stag Light</i> by Emily Turner	MI	Escanaba	906-553-9778	aact.org/calendar
Oct 16-18	Alabama State Festival	AL	Decatur	205-483-2282	altheatre.org
Oct 20-22	New York State Festival	NY	Rome	315-225-4157	tanys.org
Oct 28	AACT Executive Committee Meeting	MN	Rochester	817-732-3177	
Nov 6-7	Illinois State Festival	IL	Cicero	847-204-5799	illinoistheatre.org/event-6603826

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IMPORTANT DATES

VIP Registration Open
JULY 1, 2026

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