

Paducah, USA

Paducah’s Market House Theatre: The Show Must Go On



In the UNESCO Creative City of Paducah, USA, a local community theatre has been entertaining audiences offering comedies, musicals, and thought-provoking performances for nearly six decades. The award-winning, nationally recognized Market House Theatre had its origins in 1963 as the result of an effort by eight theatre-minded members of the Civic Beautification Board to save one of Paducah’s architectural treasures—the historic 1905 Market House. The second play of the Market House Players was produced in the Market House that same year and the group has called it home ever since.

Nestled in the heart of the historic downtown, the 1905 Market House has been transformed from a place of commerce to a place of culture, housing Yeiser Art Center, the Market House Museum, and Market House Theatre. The Theatre continues to be a constant centerpiece of historic restoration—integrating culture and creativity in urban development. With

the acquisition of three additional buildings in 1996, they expanded their capacity for offering quality entertainment and “hands-on” artistic experiences for people of all ages. It now operates out of eleven historic buildings that provide space for dance/music classes, rehearsals, a fully functional scene shop, costume shop, a multi-use venue, and accommodations for guest directors or visitors.

Market House Theatre’s goals include providing a regular schedule of artistic opportunities, offering education and training in theatre, and encouraging participation in the arts as a way to enrich our community and teach valuable life lessons. They reach out to tens of thousands of adults and children in 41 schools and four states each year through dramatic arts and education programs.

Live theatre is a safe place to explore difficult subjects and help people cope or expand their perspective. Over the years, the Theatre has tactfully brought controversial programming to Paducah in a way that resonates with





both the rural and urban community. The intimate setting of a dark theatre compels audiences to objectively observe actors portraying people with diverse life situations or conflicting points of view.

As live performance evolves, improvisational theatre is taking center stage. “The future of theatre is not people sitting in a seat and watching people do something. The future of theatre is people creating the art,” said Executive Director Michael Cochran. Two examples are the early childhood program Playtime, in which children engage with the actors and transform the stories of their favorite books, and the adult Murder Mystery Dinner/Theatre, where audiences are literally immersed and actively participate in the performances.

Market House Theatre’s philosophy concerning live community theatre is “The Show Must Go On.” In 2020 when COVID-19 restrictions were announced, the Theatre responded with creative programming. Being an intimate space that did not require a lot of technology made them agile. They removed a number of seats in the Main Theatre and performed to smaller audiences. In an effort to maintain ticket sales, they hired a film crew and offered streaming shows on BroadwayOnDemand.com. As a result, people all over the country who would never have had the opportunity to see friends

and family perform were able to purchase tickets and watch online.

The Theatre already had plans for an outdoor courtyard performance/event space but COVID-19 made it imperative to launch this project ahead of schedule. Engineering and architectural studies determined that the cost was far more than they could afford in 2020. The management team adapted and formulated an affordable multi-year plan. Four productions and 16 performances of the Playtime series were held in 2020. Now in stage two, 2021 is on track to continue that trend. Fully produced family shows, adult-oriented plays, and three dance showcases have all been presented in the Courtyard.

The Theatre's management staff has won the trust and respect of the community with thoughtful programming and financial accountability. "Successful performing arts projects take ten years. What we do on stage now, we could not do 10 years ago. Take small steps if you have to but maintain your mission," said Cochran. "By honing it down to what you are trying to accomplish you end up with what you really need."

The Creative Cities Network strives to help each of us enhance our city's creative potential for sustainable urban development, exchange know-how and cooperate on an international level. The Theatre also has its own creative network of executives across the country that are managing day-to-day operations and steering their teams. "You can reach out within the network





and ask what’s working because they also have to continue the mission of their theatres,” said Cochran. The cooperation is mutually beneficial. Paducah has welcomed a host of guest playwrights and directors over the years and Cochran has presented best practices insight on non-profit management locally and nationally. “It makes us all one family.”

To learn more about Paducah’s cultural assets, visit www.paducah.travel.

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