

A decade of big theater in a little space: StageWest celebrates 10th anniversary of starting conversations

By Andrew Brink

Between the revolutions and resolutions found in “Urinetown,” the hurricane of satire and song that launched StageWest’s 10th theater season on Sept. 22, the piercingly inquisitive Little Sally (played by Dani Cisna) and Officer Lockstock (played by Lenny Houts, whose funnier-than-a-urinal-full-of-monkeys performance requires the audience to practice serious bladder control) exchange the following colloquy:

Little Sally: I don’t think many people are going to come see this musical, Officer Lockstock.

Officer Lockstock: Why do you say that, Little Sally? Don’t you think people want to be told that their way of life is unsustainable?

Little Sally: That, and the title’s awful.

Officer Lockstock: I suppose you’re right, Little Sally. I do suppose you’re right.

Little Sally: Can’t we do a happy musical next time?

“Urinetown” is an ugly title for a brilliant show. But for theater companies like StageWest, who are in the business of producing contemporary theater, the reality reflected on stage, as Little Sally lamented, doesn’t have to be good-looking. More importantly, in the words of Ron Lambert, artistic director and founding member of StageWest, a performance simply needs to “start a conversation.”

And in keeping with Officer Lockstock’s logic, being committed to convening a conversation isn’t always the safest route to sustainability.

“It would be easier to consistently attract large audiences with more well-known titles,” says Lambert. “I understand the comfort level of presenting tired and true hits. I’ve seen ‘Cats’ and ‘Les Misérables’ each eight times.”

Lambert likens the mission of StageWest to that of the Fleur Cinema: a presenter of new, engaging, and possibly overlooked stories.

“We want to try new things and build a reputation where you might not have heard of the show we are doing, but you know we will present a quality production.”

StageWest’s production history reads like a litany of the repressed, resented and last picked on the playground: “Hedwig and the Angry Inch,” “Bat Boy: The Musical” and “Jeffrey,” a gay love story, which Lambert remembers because of the surprisingly warm response it received.

“I’ll never forget a retirement-age, heterosexual couple coming up after the show and thanking us for doing the show and saying it was the most poignant and beautiful love story they had seen on stage.”

For Stacy Brothers, who does marketing and advertising for JAX Outdoor Gear in Ames and who has directed three plays for StageWest, including “Frozen” this past January, StageWest has provided more than just food for thought. It’s allowed her to play in the garden.

“Someone asked me the other day why so many people gravitate toward StageWest to work shows,” says Brothers. “There are lots of reasons. It is a nurturing, cooperative environment.”

Brothers credits the material StageWest has given her in helping her evolve as an artist.

“600 community theaters haven’t already performed the piece you are looking at, so there are few precedents or expectations. ... There’s nothing stopping me from exploring and growing as a director.”

‘Let’s find a barn and put on a show’

During the same year “RENT” debuted on Broadway and the world welcomed a cloned sheep named Dolly, five friends in Des Moines were creating an organization from materials even smaller than a cell: scratch.

Lambert, along with Tom Blackett, Pat Henson, Jim Jacobson and Laurince McElroy, formed a circle of friends with a common interest in theater. Jacobson, Lambert and McElroy had worked on shows together before co-founding StageWest.

“We had meetings for what seemed like forever,” says Lambert, “discussing names, by-laws. ... everything but putting on a show. One day, we finally said, ‘It doesn’t mean much to be organizing a theater if we’re not going to do a show.’”

In the summer of 1996, Lambert and company took StageWest’s first steps by presenting a script adapted for the stage by McElroy titled, “Voices That Care: Stories and Encouragements for People with AIDS/HIV and Those Who Care for Them.” The production was sponsored by the AIDS Project of Central Iowa and was performed under the roof of the First Unitarian Church. All profits from the show went to the AIDS Project.

StageWest’s second production was a one-actor show titled, “Out of Spite: Tales of Survival in Sarajevo,” a Canadian play that made its American debut in Des Moines. Lambert’s interest in sponsoring refugees during, and following, the Bosnian civil war underscored the production and affected its poignancy.

“With the help of many Bosnian friends who worked on the show, we were able to create a realistic feel for the environment and event,” says Lambert.

With two shows under their belt, the fledgling company achieved certain degrees of artistic success that weren’t exactly translating to money in the bank.

“We were losing our shirts at the box office,” Lambert says.

The founding members, who were funding the productions, were soon inspired, as Lambert says, to “either cease operations or get serious” and present a full season and build an audience.

Lambert recalled that surprisingly, StageWest truly “arrived” with its 2000 production of the tried and true “Hair.”

“Audiences embraced it in record numbers and it brought us more attention than any other production.”

70 dog years and the future

As with dog years, one year of producing live theater - where the only constant is a milieu of shifting financial health, organizational stability and public interest - isn’t exactly equivalent to a single trip around the sun. But then, a theatre’s success isn’t solely measured by the usual suspects of profit, retention and cross-checked gambles.

It’s no surprise, then, that when looking back on StageWest’s first decade, Lambert doesn’t linger on facts and figures when talking about its accomplishments.

“From the beginning, we have never strayed from our core mission of bringing primarily new plays and musicals to Central Iowa artists and audiences,” says Lambert. “It is important for us to provide theater artists with new challenges.”

Todd Buchacker, a manager for Planned Parenthood who has both acted in and directed plays for StageWest, believes the company's biggest accomplishment is simply staying in the game.

"I think [their] greatest contribution," says Buchacker, "is hanging in there and continuing to do this type of theater and striving to keep the production values at a high standard. Big theater in a little space is how I think of it."

Joseph Leonardi, artistic director of The Repertory Theater of Iowa, concurs with Buchacker.

"Without a doubt," says Leonardi, "StageWest enhances the quality of place of Des Moines. They offer our community a brand of daring, less mainstream theater that, until they came onto the scene, wasn't being produced here. In that regard they are pioneers."

Ten years of producing contemporary theater has not come without its challenges.

Lambert cites creating their own identity, while sharing a space with other theaters - StageWest produces their shows in the Civic Center's Stoner Theater - as one of their biggest obstacles.

But StageWest appears to be focused squarely on the future. Lambert's time is already spent researching shows for next season. And they hope to finally begin paying staff members while continuing to build a stable financial foundation, which Lambert describes as "a work in progress."

"When isn't it?" Lambert asks, most likely, after a decade of producing theater, knowing the answer. *CV*

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