



CENTER STAGE: CIRCLE PLAYERS TURNS 65

After sixty-five years, the drama continues for Circle Players! Nashville's oldest community theatre organization marks a milestone year during its current season that runs through June 2015 with the slogan "Circle Thrives at 65!"

This season's line-up of shows represents many aspects of Circle's identity in the non-profit arts community: a regional premiere of a Broadway musical (*The Addams Family*), a collaboration with a university theatre program (*Ragtime the Musical* in partnership with Tennessee State University), a classic non-musical play (*Picnic*), and a youth musical production (*The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*).

"We're thrilled about the upcoming season and the opportunity to celebrate 65 years of outstanding performances and community service in the arts," says Max Desir, President of the Board of Directors. "Since my involvement with Circle Players began in 2010, I have been impressed by the capacity of this nonprofit organization to reach excellence season after season. It's due to the effort of countless volunteers, artist members and season supporters in keeping this organization alive."

During seven decades of operation, Circle Players has produced more than 500 musicals, comedies and dramas and now has more than 600 artist members (the title Circle gives to its volunteers on and off stage). That's a big difference from when the organization began 65 years ago.

Circle Players was created in 1949 by an ambitious group of volunteer actors, directors, producers, designers, and stage hands who founded the company on a stock-ownership basis.. The venture was described in Circle's 30th anniversary booklet by Carrie Silverthorne, Circle's first bookkeeper:

"With money in the bank, the theatre started out on a rather grandiose scale by renting an assembly room at the Hermitage Hotel with adjoining rooms for dressing rooms and a prop room. Needless to say this was a very high rental fee for beginners. But our optimism was great and our energy seemingly boundless."

Circle's first production was *Home of the Brave*—a hit with critics and audiences. But that show nor the next three productions were enough to cover expenses at Hermitage Hotel, and the fledgling theatre company began looking for cheaper venues. Circle moved to the YMCA—the first of many moves during its 65 years. Early venues included an old gambling den at Fourth Avenue and Broadway, the basement of what is now the Bluebird Café and Hillsboro High School. In recent years, Circle shows have been performed at Looby Theatre, The Larry Keeton Theatre, TSU Performing Arts Center, Lipscomb University Shamblin Theater, Sarratt Cinema at Vanderbilt and The Fortress in Marathon Village.

By the mid-1950s, Circle's leadership decided to change from a corporation to a non-profit arts organization and Circle became what it remains today: an all-volunteer organization which includes Artist Members and a Board of Directors.

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The change strengthened Circle's fiscal operation and allowed it to continue producing quality stage plays and musicals. That landed Circle a spot as the first resident theatre company of the new Tennessee Performing Arts Center which opened in 1980. For more than 20 years, TPAC's Johnson Hall was home to Circle Players.

Some who were active in Circle productions at that time left the organization when it moved from TPAC. But several have returned in recent years as Circle has regained its footing as a live entertainment staple in Nashville.

L.B. (Loren) Gaiters is one of the returnees. Back in 1997, while serving on Circle's Board and working as a professor at Tennessee State University, Gaiters connected Circle and TSU Theatre Program for the highly successful production of *Miss Evers' Boys* at TPAC. In 2012, Gaiters returned to reunite the two institutions in collaboration for award-winning musical *The Color Purple* at TSU.

"The benefits are countless when two organizations come together like that. Everyone learns from each other," says Gaiters. "And when there is collaboration, you expand your audience. The broader community senses that this is something special."

Such community outreach has been a tenet of Circle Players since its early years—through public performances at schools and parks and community festivals; presentations at schools, community centers and nursing homes; and post-show talks with audience interaction.

Through the years, Circle Players has touched many lives in Middle Tennessee, helping to spark and develop the talents of hundreds of artists of all ages. Many are recreational performers and designers who work in other professions. Some are professional performers who engage with Circle Players to support its mission or a particular production. Still others are ambitious, developing artists who believe Circle Players is a stepping stone to greater, national performing opportunities.

"I've come to learn that there's always a Circle connection," says LaTonya Turner, a former Board president who is still an active volunteer. "So many times when I mention my involvement with Circle Players, people will say 'Oh, I used to perform in Circle shows' or 'I've always liked the shows Circle presents.'"

Turner started volunteering with Circle Players because of her daughter's interest in musical theatre.

"My daughter was 9 years old when she performed in her first show with Circle Players, *The King and I*. From that moment, she's been passionate about musical theatre and plans that for her major when she attends college in a year. I'm sure her participation in Circle productions shaped her ambition and talent," says Turner.

Circle Players can rightfully claim to have contributed to the development of performing careers for several artists. One of them is Mark Allen, an artist member in the late 90s through early 2000s and now a successful New York composer. Allen returned to Nashville in 2013 for Circle's premiere of his musical, *Band Geeks!*

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“I came full circle to Circle Players!” jokes Allen. “It’s amazing to know that part of my theatre experience circled back here to what I do now—bringing it back to my home town, to an organization that I have great respect for and that I have a history with.”

The quality of Circle productions, its track record of embracing performers of all abilities, and the accessibility of its shows have attracted support and acknowledgement from big names in theatre far beyond Nashville. David DeSilva, the creator of *FAME* (the movie and Broadway production) asked Circle Players to present the U.S. premiere of his musical sequel, *FAME Forever*. DeSilva supported the production and traveled to Middle Tennessee for opening weekned in 2011.

“This is a wonderful company, and there’s always such a talented mix of artists who live in the community, who work and spend their days in paying jobs often unrelated to theatre, then perform with Circle because of their passion and love for the organization,” says DeSilva.

“That’s the beauty of being in community theatre. It’s removed from what we call ‘professional productions’ that have unions involved and cost a lot of money to produce and therefore the ticket prices are much higher. They don’t involve the talent living in the community, and the community just goes to see the production, but they’re not involved as a theatre experience.”

Circle’s 2012 production of *TITANIC the Musical* at TPAC in observance of the ship’s 100th anniversary, was acknowledged by writer/composer Maury Yetson and supported and endorsed by founders of the Titanic Museum.

Tim Larson directed that show and several others for Circle Players and is slated to direct the current season’s production of *Ragtime the Musical*.

“Circle takes risks on big musicals, classic dramas and even controversial topics of the day,” says Larson. “I came to love working with Circle Players when I was asked to direct a production of *Annie* around 2005, which was my return to directing community theatre after an 18-year hiatus. Circle has such a rich history and I wanted to be part of it.

“I have continued to work with Circle for many reasons, but mainly because it’s an all-volunteer organization that opens its arms to all performing artists and technicians who want to be a part of the productions. The organization is made up of people who love the theatre and do it for that love.”

Volunteers and donors have sustained Circle Players since the 1950s. Dr. Richard Baxter and his wife, Jane, have been donors and season subscribers to Circle Players for more than 30 years.

“The wide repertoire of performances and the recent tremendous musical productions make Circle the best choice for community theater attendance in Nashville,” says Baxter. “We agree with a comment we heard recently while attending a Circle show. A lady said she had seen the same play on Broadway, but the Circle production was superior with greater vocal performances. And I have to mention that the shows are a tremendous value for such outstanding entertainment.”

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In many ways, it is remarkable that Circle Players has survived so long: it has always been governed by a volunteer board, operated by volunteer artists and technicians, dependent on donations and grants, and nomadic in performance venues (with the exception of the TPAC years).

“It’s a testament to Circle’s founders and early supporters that so many different governing boards and hundreds of volunteers have honored the organization’s bylaws and mission over the decades,” says Turner. “There’s willingness and intent to not mess with what has worked so well, but make improvements when truly needed.”

Many Circle supporters believe the organization’s long roots and legacy will take it far into the future. They also hope that future includes a deeply-held desire and goal of the organization’s strategic plan launched in 2009: a permanent home-- a venue, rehearsal space and warehouse in a central location that is owned and maintained by Circle Players for its productions and the benefit of the non-profit arts community.

“Circle has been very successful at navigating among various performance venues in Nashville,” says Desir. “But it’s now time for this community treasure to get the support it deserves to have a home of its own and continue to produce thousands of plays for the next 65 years.”

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