

A Theatre by Any Other Name

***By Randal K. West
Artistic Director***

The Stephen Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts

Like It Was

Fairfield Iowa has always been a very unique town within the state. It was part of the Circuit "Chautauqua" that brought famous lecturers and a variety of Opera Stars and Broadway offerings to towns across America in the 20's and the 30's. Syd Spayde, while at Parsons College in the 60's and beyond, founded a summer theatre festival that featured the likes of Macdonald Carey, Basil Rathbone, Bob Newhart and Pat O'Brien in live theatre productions.

In 1974, Maharishi University of Management purchased Parsons College, and founded a school which focuses on consciousness-based learning to foster intelligence and is a magnet for people who practice Transcendental Meditation. After a 1979 world peace conference, 800 new residents moved to Fairfield at the urging of the university's founder Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

Today, this community, already a very exciting place for the fine and performing arts has grown into a culturally diverse and artistically metropolitan "gem" in the Mid-West. Fairfield currently showcases over 20 art galleries housing the works of local artists. It's known as the "Number 1 Tourist Attraction" in Iowa with "First Friday Night Art Walks". The Art Walks embrace both the creative and the performing arts with a thriving music and theatre scene. Now, Fairfield, Iowa is building the Stephen Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts.

Yes, the Stephen Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts is currently being built in Fairfield, Iowa. It's going to be a 520 seat theatre with full orchestra pit, complete rigging, state of the art sound and lighting. Contained within our theatre lobby will be a traveling art gallery promoting local and national artists.

How did this theatre end up in Fairfield, Iowa and what is it going to be?

Opening Doors

In 2000, Fairfield was well on its way to being the diverse cultural haven it has become but was scarce in quality spaces to house its performing arts. A board was formed to raise money for a convention center that would house an exhibition hall, some meeting rooms, a formal board room, a Parson's College museum, a full-service art studio, art gallery space and a theatre.

By 2005, most of the money was raised or pledged, the plans had been drawn and they were moving toward breaking ground. A business plan was created that called for the building to produce a designated amount of income in order to stay open.

A study was done which confirmed that not enough people lived in Fairfield to support the building; programming would have to pull audiences throughout Iowa and the Mid-West. An additional study revealed that while Iowa had theatres which housed "A" level national tours, in both Iowa City and Des Moines, a 520 seat theatre in Fairfield was simply too small to book "A" list tours. Rather than settle for "B" level touring packages other avenues were explored.

Only one of the major universities and colleges in Iowa offered musical theatre courses yet they were all turning out music and theatre majors who hoped to work in the field. Of the three professional theatres in Iowa one specialized in doing farce and dabbled in some musical theatre, another was a period theatre that specialized in Shakespeare, and the third theatre was rather eclectic. But '*no one*' was only producing professional musical theatre. Theatre, in general, didn't seem to be something that younger people were being told had any real connection to them either as an audience member or as a participant.

Musical Theatre is certainly one of America's most loved performing Art forms and it is one of the few performing art forms that can truly claim American roots. In the spirit of Mickey and Judy we were about to "have a barn" but what are we to put in it?

Merrily We Roll Along

In 2006, a commitment was made toward founding Iowa's first professional musical theatre company. The first step was to create the "Encore Players", Iowa's first professional touring musical theatre company. This provided the means for going to the defined "feeder" cities and showing audiences the difference between community theatre (where people would not travel an hour or more to see), and professional musical theatre (where hopeful audiences would travel to see).

The Encore Players were granted the fourth performance rights for a very sophisticated yet hysterically funny piece entitled "*The Musical of Musicals, (the musical!)*." Rights were granted for the fourth professional performance for the state of Iowa because the commercial producer Melanie Herman understood what we were trying to create in Fairfield and she supported that effort. She not only granted the performance rights but she and the Artistic Producer from the York Theatre, James Morgan, (who originally produced "Musical of Musicals") and both writers Joanne Bogart and Eric Rockwell, (who also played the leads on Broadway), all came to Fairfield to see the initial weekend of shows and "blessed the tour". As the Encore Players began touring Iowa to create enthusiasm for professional musical theatre, their Artistic Director Randal K. West was asked to present an Artistic Vision for the Theatre Company.

Our Time

"Thank God musical theatre made sense because if what they needed was a good Shakespearean company I sure wouldn't be the right guy," stated Randal K. West, Artistic Director, when he unveiled his "Vision".

His vision went like this: The Midwest is ready for a fully professional residential company that specializes in Musical Theatre. First, it should be founded with a multiple mission toward upscale musical theatre. We should always plan to do a certain amount of "new work". The need exists to support the creation of new musicals and help them in their process toward becoming solid entertainment that advances the art form. Also, to nurture and train new talent both in performing and designing musical theatre.

Every project should have an educational component. We should found a Performing Arts Conservatory connected to our Summer Musical Theatre Company as soon as possible. From its inception we should be offering a College residential internship program, workshops and seminars. Our goal is to present the very best in musical theatre and offer audiences a chance to see Broadway performers in roles that they helped define. Randy West then detailed an aggressive plan toward presenting both concert versions of musicals, and fully mounted musicals, utilizing the very best of Broadway talent mixed with the very best of “up and coming talent”.

Not a Day Goes By

As the theatre vision was being created and refined, the naming committee came to Randal West and asked if there was any chance he could ask Stephen Sondheim to lend his name to the building. Randy had worked with Steve while he was the Theatre Coordinator for the City of Phoenix. George Furth and Stephen Sondheim used a Phoenix production of “*Merrily We Roll Along*” as a means of being part of the workshop process after the La Jolla Playhouse workshop.

Though George Furth had been a closer relationship, Randy had stayed in contact with Stephen Sondheim over the years--it would be difficult to find a Sondheim “true believer” with more zeal than Randy. His Master Thesis was on Sondheim. When Randy was a Musical Theatre professor his students accused him of burning incense at Stephen Sondheim’s alter.

When commissioned by a dinner theatre to write a musical murder mystery, Randy opened “Music Most Foul” with a Sondheim spoof opera. Having directed many of Sondheim’s pieces, he always purported Sondheim as the single most important force in musical theatre.

Randy’s artistic vision was close to many strong beliefs that Sondheim held true; supporting the creation of “New Work”, and training the next generation of musical theatre talent. It was through this deep admiration and respect for Mr. Sondheim that Randy was urged to ask. “Sometimes you idolize a cultural icon for what they have done, and what they stand for, and you really have no right to expect them to not only be everything you desperately hoped they would be but to surpass it,” says Randy. He crafted his request as best he could, submitted it and waited.

The brand new 520-seat theatre that will open with a Sondheim Gala in December of 2007 has been named *The Stephen Sondheim Center for the*

Performing Arts in Fairfield, Iowa, and it will house this new vision for professional musical theatre in the Midwest.

Now You Know

The Encore Players are getting ready to tour Iowa again this year in an attempt to create enthusiasm for professional musical theatre; they will be touring with exclusivity. Thanks to a very generous gesture on Stephen Sondheim's part, the "Encore Players" will be touring throughout Iowa sharing a new revue comprised entirely of music created by Stephen Sondheim. Not only will we be promoting musical theatre this year, sharing the genius of Stephen Sondheim, we will be showing how honored we are to be opening a Performing Arts Center named after him.

"I'm honored and flattered that you would choose to name a building after me. What thrills me most is not the boost for my ego but the fact that I'm a part, no matter how distant, of your devotion to the development of professional musical theater, especially as it contributes to the cultural landscape of the Midwest. Support for the arts on the East and West coasts is highly publicized, less so in your section of the country. I hope that the Stephen Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts will prove to be a major contribution."

**Gratefully,
Stephen Sondheim**

The theatre opens with its first fully mounted musical with a production of "*Merrily We Roll Along*" in January of 2008, followed by the founding of the Concert musicals; and leading to our first full summer season.

Are you developing a new piece of musical theatre, work shopping one, or trying to polish a prior work? We're here for you. Are you a professional performer, Director, Musical Director or Choreographer looking for a place to do great work? Here's the place. Want to make your work about the piece and the art form and take an audience where only musical theatre can take them? Try Fairfield. Performers or designers who want to develop your art in musical theatre, here's your opportunity! All are welcome. Let us know! Call Randy West at 641-472-2000, email him at rwest@sondheimcenter.com, or mail to Randy West, Sondheim Center, Box 2396, Fairfield, Iowa, 52556.

Let's hope that a year from now we are well on our way to a "***Good Thing Going***"!