

A LARGER STAGE: New, expanding and returning groups make 2008 eventful in Q-C area theaters

By David Burke | Friday, December 19, 2008

At the beginning of 2008, Turner Hall in the Village of East Davenport was unused, with the possibility of a bar being opened in the more-than-85-year-old building.

At the same time, a former bank building at the corner of 16th and Harrison streets in Davenport was sitting vacant.

Today, both are home to parts of a broadening Quad-City theater scene.

The rechristened Village Theatre is now the home of the new Riverbend Theatre Collective, which was begun by returning Moline native Allison Collins-Elflin; Curtainbox Theatre Co., which was moved from Los Angeles by founder and Davenport native Kimberly Furness; and the resurgence of the New Ground Theatre, which founder Chris Jansen had scaled back to a play-reading series and theater classes in 2007. (Scott Community College has its performances there as well.)

The former bank is now the home of Harrison Hilltop Theatre, begun by actors Tristan Layne Tapscott and Chris Walljasper.

Besides those four groups, 2008 was also the first full year for the Green Room Theatre, started in the former Brew & View building in downtown Rock Island by founders Derek Bertelsen and Tyson Danner.

RIVERBEND THEATRE COLLECTIVE

Allison Collins-Elflin

Where was your company at in the beginning of 2008? At the beginning of 2008, RTC had just received our 501(c)(3) nonprofit status and had yet to put on our first production.

What has been the highlight of your company's year? We have two highlights — 1. Obtaining our nonprofit status (not an easy thing!), and 2. The success of our first production "Elegies — A Song Cycle." We made a nice profit with that one!

What was the biggest challenge in your company's year? Our biggest challenge of the year, as most young companies can attest, was finding our audience. I think as we grow, our audience will continue to grow as well. We are greatly looking forward to testing ourselves in new ways to find our audience.

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What are some of your anticipated projects for 2009? In April, we are producing a comedy called "Five Women Wearing the Same Dress," in early June, the Jason Robert Brown musical "The Last Five Years," in late July, a new musical called "In This House," and our late August production is still to be determined.

What can be done to ensure the current theater scene survives, if not grows, in the Quad-Cities? For all companies to continue to offer a rich and diverse choice in the art that they see and participate in.

HARRISON HILLTOP THEATRE

Tristan Layne Tapscott,

on behalf of co-founder Chris Walljasper

Where was your company at in the beginning of 2008? In January 2008, this wasn't even an idea. Chris and I had formed a friendship in the Green Room's "Carousel" in December and both were cast in Circa 21's "Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story." After spending 12 weeks together, we decided to continue the working relationship under the My Verona moniker. We had a great time working together as producers and decided to take it all to next level. We formed a company of our own. By April, it was said and done; we were leasing the space now known as the Hilltop. Our first in the space was off and running in July. ... and we have since produced six full productions and two readings (three of those featuring new works, three were area premieres). I'd say for as fast it all happened, we're extremely happy with the results we have seen.

What has been the highlight of your company's year? Our proudest accomplishments include our "Q-C star-studded" production of "A Streetcar Named Desire," "The Odd Couple" and "Mono-Blogs" and our current production of "Santaland Diaries." ... Each one of our endeavors has something special ... but I think one of the best things is repeat business. People always come back! That's incredible. Our attendance is rising. ... and our productions of "Odd Couple" and "Streetcar" sold out (and "Odd Couple" was extended) — and even "Mono-Blog's" second weekend was rather large. For being fairly new in the area, we seem to attract some serious talent and sizable audiences.

What was the biggest challenge in your company's year? The financial realities of opening a business like this are astounding. We are to a point now where some of the money we initially invested is being recouped. There are also financial hardships we face with each show (luckily, we usually end up at least breaking even — although lately we have turned over a profit), but aside from all of that "nonsense," while we attract top-notch talent for most of the principals in each show, we often have a difficult time finding the supporting players or sometimes even age-appropriate performers. Our shows oftentimes end up with nontraditional casting by necessity. That is changing, however, but slowly.

What are some of your anticipated projects for 2009? On the slate so far are "True West" (featuring Eddie Staver III), "To Kill a Mockingbird," "The Graduate" and area premieres of "La Llorona" and "Huddersfield." Two other productions are currently being negotiated and, due to contractual issues, we can't talk about them. Our 2009-10 season is currently being set and will be announced very soon. We are very excited about that and the addition of our film division and our continued support for new works (particularly one-man shows) ...

What can be done to ensure the current theater scene survives, if not grows, in the Quad-Cities? To stay involved and support each other! It's truly about collaboration, and that is key.

NEW GROUND THEATRE

Chris Jansen

Where was your company at in the beginning of 2008? A year ago, we were running classes in our new building and foregoing full productions in favor of our reading series at the (River Music Experience). The space wasn't ready to support full productions, and the readings gave us the opportunity to do plays that would be difficult to

produce because of casting or technical considerations.

What has been the highlight of your company's year? I think our shining moment this year was our production of Lee Blessing's "A Body of Water." It was the christening of the space as a producing venue, and having Lee, Ellen Dolan and Dan Hagen come out and help us with that was great. Lee has told me several times that he was very proud of that production. I'm also very grateful to the many people who supported us by coming to our fundraising events.

What was the biggest challenge in your company's year? Our biggest challenge continues to be our attempt to own our building. Our landlord, Schiltz Properties, has been very helpful and supportive.

What are some of your anticipated projects for 2009? We are expanding our Youth Theatre class offerings — notably by starting an advanced touring troupe in January. We are looking for the 12 teens in the Quad-Cities who want to do theater more than anything else! Besides that, we are planning to produce some original scripts in May, and the "Body of Water" cast wants to come back this summer and do another show.

What can be done to ensure the current theater scene survives, if not grows, in the Quad-Cities? You know my answer to this. I think support and coverage from our local media is invaluable! The more coverage we can get, the more people will know who we are and where to find us! Another concern, affordable performing space, I am trying to address with the Village Theatre Project.

THE GREEN ROOM THEATRE

Tyson Danner

and Derek Bertelsen

Where was your company at in the beginning of 2008? By the beginning of 2008, we had already produced a few shows. The Green Room opened Aug. 10, 2007, with our production of "Into the Woods." We presented two other productions ("The Glass Menagerie" and "Carousel") in 2007. The one-man show "Fully Committed" was our first show of 2008. We were continuing to work on developing our audience and had met many exciting new actors. We added three shows to our originally scheduled season and had begun to plan our second season.

What has been the highlight of your company's year? Presenting Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" has been a highlight of The Green Room's past year. While most small theaters would shy away from such a challenging play, we feel we've embraced the show and all its elements. Our production of "Assassins" was also a favorite time for both of us. It ended our first season on a high note, requiring an extended run. It was exciting to stage a musical that many thought they'd never see in the Quad-Cities.

What was the biggest challenge in your company's year? As a two-part, 7 1/2-hour play, "Angels" required an enormous time commitment from the actors. Finding people who were right for the parts and willing to spend three months working on it was a significant challenge. But, our faith in the Quad-Cities' theatrical community is constantly being strengthened. We did find those actors, and each one is perfect for our production and a joy to work with. Because we enjoy producing a wide variety of material (including many lesser-known pieces), it is always a challenge for us to retain consistency. We've discovered that when audiences can trust the quality of a theater's productions, they are eager to see works they wouldn't normally be interested in. It's not that we consider it our duty to "expand anyone's horizons," but we're always overjoyed to hear things like: "You know, I don't usually like shows like this!"

What are some of your anticipated projects for 2009? Our next production is the Quad City premiere of Jason Robert Brown's "Songs for a New World," which runs Jan. 9-18. Other scheduled productions include "Steel Magnolias," "Doubt," "Honk!" "Hair" and "Cabaret." Like last year, we'll produce another series of locally written one-act plays in the spring. We'll also continue our work to present staged readings of locally written full-length plays.

What can be done to ensure the current theater scene survives, if not grows, in the Quad-Cities? A successful theater community, in our opinion, is one that provides opportunities for artists that are interested in all kinds of material. There are always groups doing the classic musicals and plays, but contemporary shows nurture a whole new generation of actors. To create a stronger community of actors, we need more paid acting jobs. This area produces many great actors that have to move away to find work. Circa has enabled so many actors to remain in the area. If it were possible, every theater would pay its actors. But that requires a lot of funding (and, for groups that don't rely on grants, a lot of ticket sales).

The local colleges should do everything they can to involve their students in the local theatrical community. Understandably, they require their students to be involved in the schools' productions, but with so many time constraints, students don't have many opportunities for outside work. There are so many fantastic young actors at Augustana and St. Ambrose right now, but we rarely see them participating in theater outside their schools.

CURTAINBOX

THEATER COMPANY

Kimberly Furness

Where was your company at in the beginning of 2008? My company was founded in Los Angeles in 2001. However, in the beginning of 2008, we were beginning plans to remount the company here in the Quad-Cities. We produced a remount of the show "Three Viewings," which we had produced in Los Angeles at the Stella Adler Theater.

Artistically or otherwise, What has been the highlight of your company's year? Simply having produced two shows ("Three Viewings" and "Danny and the Deep Blue Sea") and receiving stellar reviews across the board along with tremendous community support.

What was the biggest challenge in your company's year? Producing shows as well as acting in them. (Furness appeared in both productions.)

What are some of your anticipated projects for 2009? We do not commit to a full season at this time, but we will be doing David Mamet's "Glengarry Glenross."

What can be done to ensure the current theater scene survives, if not grows, in the Quad-Cities? I think if you produce good work, people will come. Word of mouth can be a wonderful thing!

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