

CIVIC THEATRE

Old company loves new digs

Group, which no longer has Indianapolis as part of its name, has 29-year lease at Carmel center

By Jay Harvey
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Civic Theatre, which has officially dropped "Indianapolis" from its name as it prepares to move to the Center for the Performing Arts in Carmel, was a product of early 20th-century civic pride.

Part of the "little theater" movement across the nation, it was known as the Little Theater Society from its founding in 1914 and first staged plays the following year, making it by far the most venerable of the arts organizations taking up residence in the new center.

Civic's founders wanted to specialize in "plays of local origin" and declared the troupe's intention to be "experimental."

Its early schedules are full of forgotten farces and melodramas and the occasional enduring play ("The Importance of Being Earnest" and "The Wild Duck" among them).

Musicals came into the schedule in a big way with the move to the Indianapolis Museum of Art's Showalter Pavilion in 1973.

Civic's move to the new performing-arts center's Tarkington theater and an adjoining building that includes classrooms, storage and meeting and rehearsal space — plus the 200-seat Studio Theater — will allow it to conduct all its activities at one site and to expand them.

Only the scene shop will be at a remote location, near 38th Street and Lafayette Road.

Civic will open its 2011-12 season at The Tarkington in September.

The names Studio and Tarkington (named for Indianapolis author Booth Tarkington, who wrote plays for Civic in its early years) may be temporary. The venues, as well as the entire Center for the Performing Arts,

are seeking naming rights.

With a \$10 million lease and a 29-year period over which to pay that amount, Civic's leaders feel they're in a permanent home they've never had, despite lengthy residencies elsewhere.

Before moving to Marian University in 2004, the organization had been at the Showalter Pavilion for 31 years, and before that there was a decades-long tenure at the Hedback Community Theatre on North Alabama Street, now home to Footlite Musicals.

Each move has forced patrons to readjust, but this one may put patron loyalty to its greatest test. Putting a good spin on it, Cheri L. Dick, Civic's executive director, said: "Sixty percent of our patrons already live north of 38th Street."

The artistic team is excited about the move, she and artistic director Robert J. Sorbera agree.

The proscenium (area between the curtain and the orchestra) is 10 feet wider, and there's more trap room (trap doors won't send actors down among the orchestra in the new facility).

There's also a spacious flyloft, so that the ingenuity required to move set pieces in from the sides could be shifted so they can be lowered from above.

Civic has one year left on its lease at Marian University, and may maintain a role there, Dick said, depending on the continuation of its donor-friendly outreach program to six Indianapolis charter schools.

Otherwise, its future lies wholly to the north, in a city that probably escaped Tarkington's notice.

In 1946, the year of his death, Carmel was a village with a population of less than 1,000.

★ Call Star reporter Jay Harvey at (317) 444-6402.

ARTISTIC GROUPS FIND A HOME IN CARMEL

In addition to Civic Theatre, the Center for the Performing Arts will serve as home base (including rehearsal and performance space) for six other organizations that will perform inside the Palladium, as well as the Studio and Tarkington theaters. — Jay Harvey

ACTORS THEATRE OF INDIANA

www.actorstheatreofindiana.org; (317) 669-7983. Tarkington and Studio. Debut: April 29, "Chicago."

Six years ago, professional acting couple Don Farrell and Judy Fitzgerald wanted to move from New York back to her home turf. Keeping their hands in the business, they — along with Cynthia Collins — established Actors Theatre of Indiana.

They received early encouragement from Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard as plans moved forward for the Center for the Performing Arts. They began to present shows in 2006 at various venues.

Musical revues are ACT's stock in trade. "We won't veer away from our strength," said Farrell, though its first production there will be book musical "Chicago" in The Studio Theater.

CARMEL REPERTORY THEATRE

www.carmelrepertorytheatre.com; (317) 767-3973. Tarkington and Studio. Debut: March 11, "The Fantasticks."

The all-volunteer community theater company, which started several years ago, will make its resident-company debut in The Studio Theater, as founder Larry Creviston directs "The Fantasticks."

Run by a 15-member board with major funding from the city of Carmel, the company produces mostly musicals among its half-dozen shows a year, under the artistic direction of Jonathan Horton.

Publicity director R.J. Rothchild said having a home at the arts center boosts the company's chances of hosting a competition in 2013 presented by the national Association of American Community Theaters.

CARMEL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

www.carmelsymphony.org; (317) 844-9717. Palladium. Debut: Feb. 12, "A Musical Housewarming."

Founded in 1975, the Carmel Symphony Orchestra comprises both paid and unpaid musicians, assuring a core contingent of strings. All first-chair players are compensated, and passing an audition has been a prerequisite for membership since 2005.

Through most of its history, the 85-member orchestra has had just two artistic directors, David Pickett and, since 1999, David Bowden. It plays standard symphonic repertoire as well as pops almost year-round.

President and CEO Alan Davis said the move to a permanent home will center the orchestra in the city whose name it bears. Plus, he added, "We're going from playing in good venues to a world-class venue."

CENTRAL INDIANA DANCE ENSEMBLE

www.cidedance.org; (317) 844-7453. Tarkington and Studio.

Suzann DeLay, who moved to Carmel from California, where she began dance training as a child and later danced with the Sacramento Ballet, founded this dance group in 1999.

"I saw the need for a youth company here," she said. She now directs the ensemble and the Central Academy of Dance with three others: Michael Casey Clark, Ashley Jones and Oybek Tashpulatov.

About 100 dancers participated in the ensemble's December production of "The Nutcracker," its 11th. The company has 57 dancers in four divisions. The academy has enrolled almost 200 students, DeLay said. Being a resident company creates the "opportunity to actually put forth a season," she said.

GREGORY HANCOCK DANCE THEATRE

www.gregoryhancockdancetheatre.org; (317) 844-2660. Tarkington and Studio.

For 12 years, the Gregory Hancock Dance Theatre has specialized in using jazz, ballet, modern and ethnic dance forms to communicate the vision of its namesake, who is founder and artistic director.

"Our unique aspect is that we do story ballets or shorter story ballets, so that people without a lot of dance experience can follow it," Hancock said. The company has nine full-time dancers, supported by a pre-professional company — students ages 13 to 18.

The troupe's home studio, where its tuition-supported academy is located, is within walking distance of the Center for the Performing Arts, so lack of studio space at the center is of little concern.

INDIANA WIND SYMPHONY

www.indianawindsymphony.org; (317) 844-4341. Palladium. Debut: Feb. 26, "Rhapsody in Blue."

The Indiana Wind Symphony was founded in 1997 by Indianapolis native Charles Conrad, a church choir director and trumpet teacher who still directs it. The adult, all-volunteer concert band numbers from 65 to 70 players, playing six or seven concerts a season. Nearly a third of the members are school band directors.

"Most of the bands locally were doing a wonderful job of pleasing the audience, but nothing at all for the art," Conrad said. "The stronger musicians were getting tired of playing the same things over and over."

The repertoire comprises new works, historical band music, transcriptions and Broadway medleys. Conrad said a near-term goal is to hire the organization's first full-time administrator.

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