



STAGE & ARTS

As theater trickles back in the Twin Cities, it's full steam ahead in Lanesboro

Lanesboro's Commonweal Theatre was among the nation's first to resume indoor shows.

By Chris Hewitt Star Tribune | JULY 23, 2021 — 9:25AM



PHOTO PROVIDED

Lizzy Andretta and Josiah Laubenstein in rehearsal for "Dancing Lessons."

LANESBORO, MINN. – The Guthrie Theater won't be up and running for two months but its seats have been in action since April.

Patrons at [Lanesboro's Commonweal Theatre](#) have been using the recycled chairs, which date to the old Guthrie Theater on Vineland Place, since the company's "I Love to Eat!" opened April 15.

That made Commonweal apparently one of the first in the country to launch a full indoor season. With the Twin Cities just getting theater going again (at [Theatre Elision](#) and [Chanhasen Dinner Theatres](#)), this tourist destination 40 miles southeast of Rochester offers a preview of how indoor theater will look as it returns, as well as a snapshot of an unusual company.

"This is a town of 700 people and it has a professional theater. It's amazing!" said Lizzy Andretta, who stars in the comedy "Dancing Lessons," running in repertory with "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) [Revised]."

That three shows already have been staged at Commonweal, which kept its staff of 15 fully employed through the pandemic, is due to several factors.

Flexibility

"We spent all of 2020 looking at state mandates for indoor performances and trying to figure out, 'When can we bring people back in?'" said Hal Cropp, executive director of the 200-seat, thrust-stage venue.

"Up until late July or early August [of last year], we still thought we might be able to bring people back in the fall. I like to joke that we spent Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of every week planning. Then, Thursday we'd listen to the governor's update and Friday we'd rip up all the plans."

The Commonweal company stayed busy updating systems and producing virtual offerings. Commonweal will continue to film each production, which means its more than 1,000 subscribers now hail from as far away as Utah.

[This column continued on reverse.]

Smaller shows

Commonweal generally employs as many as 30 actors in a season but limited that to 19 this year and suspended its apprentice program, the idea being that it's easier to keep a smaller number of people safe. Plays were selected with that in mind.

"By January or so, as vaccinations were coming together, it began to look like we were going to be able to do this," Cropp said. "So we designed 2021 to start with a one-person show ['I Love to Eat!'], followed by a two-person show ['Dancing Lessons'], followed by a three-person show ['Complete Shakespeare']." The season concludes with nine people in "A Christmas Carol."

The theater often does musicals but there wasn't room in the budget this year, which focuses on crowd-pleasers. "Dancing Lessons," for instance, is a Neil Simon-esque comedy about the courtship of a dancer and a man with Asperger syndrome.

In a twist, the neurotypical woman is played by Andretta, who has Asperger's and said she constantly reminds herself to ignore her own behavioral instincts.

Luck and planning

One factor that made things easier is that much of Commonweal's company was podded up long before the pandemic. While Andretta has an apartment and Van Meter a house, about two-thirds of their colleagues live in a communal artists' residence, within walking distance of the theater.

"We recognized that Lanesboro, as a tourist destination, would have pressure on its rental space," said Cropp. "It's a three-story structure with 14 bedrooms and common living and dining areas. We also have a very diligent group of people who care tremendously about each other and are able to follow guidelines."

That appears to have been true of Fillmore County, too, where Lanesboro is located. It had 10 total deaths from COVID, remaining near the top of vaccination lists and near the bottom in COVID case percentages.

"I was quite surprised by that," Cropp said. "Last summer, in the height of what I felt to be the possibility of danger, you could walk through Lanesboro and there were long lines of people at the ice cream shop and at the outfitters', renting boats. Some were masked and some were not."

About 90% of Commonweal's audience comes from within a two-hour drive, with the rest from farther afield, often for recreational activities on the Root River.

Commonweal was fortunate that its subscribers were steadfast even without live theater to watch. According to Cropp, just 6% asked for refunds, with the others earmarking their subscriptions as donations or applying them to the current season.

Audience readiness

Cropp kept an eye on surveys about whether folks were prepared to return to indoor arts events, and he seems to have nailed it. A Thursday night "Dancing Lessons" about a week ago was two-thirds full, including a handful of mask-wearers, and weekends have been sold out.

Lanesboro appears to have embraced Commonweal's return.

"I was a little nervous. I wondered if people would have masks on," said Woodbury's Gloria Deziel, who attended with husband Joe Bieza on a break from bicycling (both are vaccinated, although Commonweal does not mandate it). "We sat down where there weren't too many people and I thought it was really nice that the lady who sat near us asked if it was OK."

[This column continued on reverse.]

Organized so actors also have administrative roles to keep them busy when they're not on stage, Commonweal is nonunion but full-time staffers say they're paid enough to support themselves without side hustles. (Jeremy Van Meter said his mortgage payment is less than half what he and his wife paid for an apartment in Chicago before they relocated to Minnesota.)

As they planned, staffers also used a national survey about patron willingness to return to indoor venues, knowing COVID-19 regulations were a moving target. When "I Love to Eat!" opened, it was with a limited capacity of 42. Groups of ticket buyers were seated one-by-one (it took 20 minutes to arrange everyone in ticket "pods"), masks were required and a QR code substituted for programs.

The theater prepared for what Cropp called "significantly reduced" houses by trimming its roughly \$1 million budget to about \$750,000.



Commonweal Theater Commonweal Theater was one of the first in the country to resume in-person performances indoors.

"It was interesting they told us the staff and the actors are vaccinated," said Bieza (only one Commonweal staffer is not, because of a medical condition). "We felt completely safe going to the theater and I've been missing it. It's been so long since we've been that I can't even remember the last thing we saw."

The couple kept encountering other outdoors enthusiasts in Lanesboro and in "Dancing Lessons," too.

"It's like a microcosm," said Bieza.

"Yes! I was surprised at how moving it was to be able to support live theater together again," said Deziel. "That's really the whole point of getting the vaccine: This is a community experience."

The actors agree.

Andretta, who performed in offseason virtual shows and also works in development, said she was skittish when rehearsals began but she's confident the theater has done what can be done to keep people safe.

"It's all such a miracle," said Andretta. "I'm so thankful to be coming out on the other side of this, employed as an actor."

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Commonweal Theatre

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