



Adrienne Sweeney stands in the theater with hand-me-down seats from the Guthrie.

COMMONWEAL THEATRE COMPANY

Lanesboro, Minnesota

At Commonweal Theatre donors get their name on a Mason jar and fill it with whatever they choose. The Donor Pantry wall has rows of jars that hold photos, paintbrushes, golf tees, messages and other mementos. It's typical of the novel thinking that seems to come naturally in Lanesboro, population 800.

Lanesboro is known as the Bed and Breakfast Capital of Minnesota.

More than one dozen B&Bs do business in this part of far southeast Minnesota, and many are historic downtown Victorians. Others overlook swoops of farmland, river or forested bluffs. Bicyclists on the 60-mile, paved Root River Trail (www.rootrivertrail.org) account for some of the tourist business. Others come to canoe, fish or hike along the limestone bluffs, which reach up to 300 feet high.

A consignment shop—the nonprofit Lanesboro Local Marketplace, in a refurbished gas station—is devoted to food, art, fishing lures, goat milk soap and other products made locally.

“It’s something we talked about for 20 years,” says Linda Hazel, store manager, but the business didn’t open until the local grocery store closed and an \$8,000 grant reduced startup costs. Now about 60 vendors within 50 miles of Lanesboro participate.

Commonweal Theatre Company began with summer-only performances. Now the regional theater operates April to December, with a season that mixes classics, performance premieres and (always) a Henrik Ibsen play. The venue—a former cheese factory furnished and decorated with a conglomeration of recycled materials—is not your typical playhouse.

Pyrex plates and cookware lids are embedded into doors. Rusty heads of hammers turn into door handles. Barn doors are bathroom stalls. Cattle stanchions are coat racks.

The 186 theater seats are pleasantly garish hand-me-downs from the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Suspended from the lobby ceiling are a bed frame and eclectic mix of other items: banged-up shovels, plungers, pitchforks and other everyday implements.

“These are the props of normal people’s lives, and historical to the region,” says Adrienne Sweeney, the theater’s marketing director. Much of the scrapyards artistry is the work of Karl Unnasch, a local sculptor who specializes in the use of reclaimed and salvaged materials.

Lanesboro used to have its own thriving opera, flour mills and horse races, but things changed when the Milwaukee Railroad rerouted its tracks, leaving the community to die. When it was nicknamed “Sewer City” the residents fought back.

They persuaded the National Register of Historic Places to list the downtown. In 1998, Lanesboro won a Great American Main Street Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

In more recent years, Lanesboro ranked among the nation’s 50 best outdoor sports towns (*Sports Afield* magazine) and 20 best “dream towns” in which to live and play (*Outside* magazine).



Commonweal Theatre Company

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Lanesboro, Minnesota

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