“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 conglomerate 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 scrapyard 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).

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