

COMMONWEAL THEATRE



**Year in
Review
2018**



PROFESSIONAL LIVE THEATRE

A Bittersweet End to Three Decades

Preparing to launch our fourth decade of the finest in live professional theatre, we felt it only fitting that we share the story of the Commonwealth's 30th season. As has been true for all thirty years of our work: the true heroes of this remarkable year are you, our audience and loyal supporters. Your commitment to us and our work helped us to make momentous strides toward our goal of creating sustainability for future generations, much of which you'll be able to read about in the following stories. Whether you soared with us through the starry night in *Silent Sky* or delighted in the radio-style retelling of one of our favorite classics in *It's A Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*, whether we ran into you on the streets of Lanesboro and shared a smile at the songs and jokes of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, your engagement and response is what truly makes our lives rewarding.

Underneath the stories which follow is our deep appreciation for those whose work goes on behind the scenes most of the time. Our Board of Directors, led by President Charles Aug and ably fortified by Treasurer Barbara De Cramer, provided support and impetus for some of this year's strides. We would be

remiss if we did not acknowledge the contributions of retiring Board members Ron Kreinbring (resuming in 2019) and Jeffrey Mintz; similarly, we warmly welcome Andre Novack and David Boen to service on our Board.

Finally, the main cause of the bitterness in this most bittersweet year was the untimely death of our Development Director Scott Roy Dixon this past November. If you were able to catch his new adaptation, *Dracula: Prince of Blood*, you understand why his great talents will be sorely missed. To that end, the 2019 season is dedicated to his memory.

So, please enjoy this look back at 2018, and we hope you'll take this as another opportunity to know just how deeply we treasure each of you.



Hal Cropp
Executive Director

The 2019 Commonwealth Resident Company



From left to right: Kelsey Heathcote, Josiah Laubenstein, Rachel Kuhnle, Bailey Otto, Thomas White, Elizabeth Dunn, Adrienne Sweeney, Ben Gorman, Hal Cropp, Brandt Roberts, David Hennessey, Lizzy Andretta, Philip Muehe, Jeremy van Meter, Eric Lee, Stela Burdt.

2018—Our Year in Review

In 1989, Eric Bunge, Scott Putnam and Scott Olson put their professional lives on hold to open the Commonweal Theatre with a production of *Crimes of the Heart*. Thirty years later, their dream is a strong and



thriving reality. Our 30th season was indeed a year of celebration and got off the ground with the warm-hearted joy of *Silent Sky* by Lauren Gunderson. In 2018, Ms. Gunderson held the title of the most produced playwright in the country and Commonweal

audiences soon found out why. In a play that featured the talents of the women in our ensemble, we were reminded of the power and scope of both the

heavens and the earth. Our version also included the remarkable lighting design talent of Paul Epton who thrilled audience members with a final moment which evoked countless “oohs” and “aahs.”

The late spring brought a group of quirky middle schoolers to the stage in the hit musical *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Paired with amazing performances by adult actors, the stories of our passionate spellers provided the valuable message that life is not always fair as each contestant dealt with their dreams, fears and expectations through touching and often hysterical tunes. In addition to those storylines, the production featured volunteer spellers from the audience who were given the chance to show off their spelling and even their dancing skills. The result was a delightful and fun experience in the theatre all summer long. And who can forget Eric Lee’s transformation into the tattoo-covered, beard-sporting giver of hugs ➔

“Our 30th season was indeed a year of celebration.”

Visiting Artist Residency—Pimsler Dance

Typically the month of January finds very little action on the Commonweal stage. That was certainly not the case in 2018 when we welcomed The Stuart Pimsler Dance & Theatre Company into residency the week of January 21-28. Stuart Pimsler Dance & Theatre, founded in 1979, is an internationally recognized performance company led by Stuart Pimsler and co-directed by Suzanne Costello since 1984. The company has been presented throughout the U.S. and numerous international locations.

While in residence for the week, the company held one workshop with the Commonweal company, and others in the community, at Lanesboro Public Schools and a local senior caregiving facility. These workshops were offered in association with, and because of, the Pimsler company’s commitment to its Arts & Health and Arts & Education programs.

The conclusion of the residency featured two public performances on the Commonweal mainstage featuring three critically acclaimed works: *At It Again*, *Bohemian Grove*, and *Tales from the Book of Longing*.



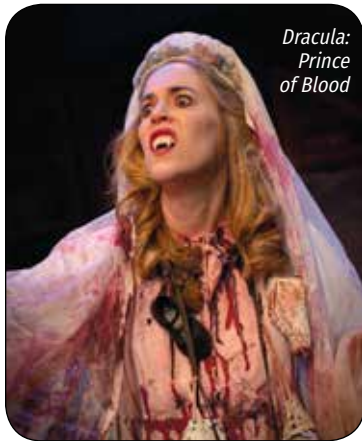
Stuart Pimsler (right, standing) observes a workshop with the Commonweal company.

This residency collaboration, along with *Love Letters* in February, was offered in part as an exploration of the range of programming possibilities during Commonweal’s off-season months. The success of these efforts will provide the basis for future programming, either through the Commonweal’s own Wealhouse initiative or outside arts organizations.



Silent Sky

Mitch Mahoney, the bee’s “comfort counselor”? In June, we were pleased to welcome the witty and clever world of *The Clean House* to complete the summer repertory. In our production, we were fortunate enough to share the talents of three Twin Cities actresses, two of whom made their Commonweal debut. Guest artists Betti Battocletti (first seen in 2017’s *Steel Magnolias*), Colleen Barrett and Fernanda Badeo truly filled the summer with joy both onstage and off, and their presence helped us tell a bitter and sweet story of the power of love. The perfect life is not always a neat and tidy one. Alongside *Spelling Bee*, it was a summer to remember as both plays gave a glimpse into what it means to be human.

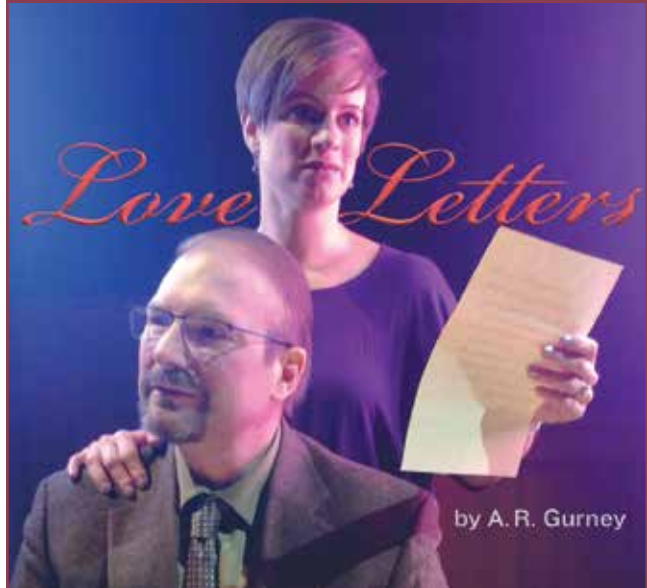


Dracula: Prince of Blood

The fall brought a world-premiere to the Commonweal stage when *Dracula: Prince of Blood* opened on September 8. What started five years earlier as a staged reading grew into a fully realized mainstage production. It quickly became a highlight of the year as we watched the process breathe new life into our dear friend and playwright Scott Dixon, who was by then nearing the end of his two-year battle with cancer. From Elizabeth Dunn’s ever-creepy portrayal of the “Lady in White” to Brandt Roberts’ nightmarish Renfield and Jeremy van Meter’s chilling portrayal of the seductive title character, the compelling adaptation provided something for even the faint of heart to enjoy. There truly was no better way to celebrate Halloween as the chill in the air approached.

And it was indeed a fitting end to season 30 at the Commonweal to tell the story of George Bailey and the delightful characters of Bedford Falls ➡

A Valentine’s Day Treat—Love Letters



Scott Dixon and Stela Burdt starred in Love Letters

In celebration of Valentine’s Day, the connection of best friends and the power of love, it was our pleasure to present two performances of the play *Love Letters* by A.R. Gurney in February of 2018. *Love Letters* follows the fictional lifelong correspondence between Andrew Makepeace Ladd III and Melissa Gardner. The two begin their letter writing as children and continue the practice into adulthood.

The Commonweal’s production was made that much more special because the roles of the longtime friends were played by real-life husband and wife Scott Dixon and Stela Burdt. As many of you are aware, at the time of the performances Scott was in a battle with stage 4 colon cancer. Scott passed away last November following his two-year journey with the disease. Ever the consummate professional, Scott’s talent and brilliance as an actor shone brightly in performance and although Scott the actor was fatigued, his Andrew was charming and compelling. Stela’s performance was no less remarkable and the result was a not-to-be-missed experience in the theatre.

And as the company said farewell to our dear friend Scott at the end of the year, his final performance as an actor also gave all of us a memory to last a lifetime.



in *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*. To the radio troupe performance, director Philip Muehe added the layer of the character Jake, a man in desperate straits, on the run from the police, who is himself transformed by the character, George, that he is invited to portray on the air. The lesson may seem a simple one—to be thankful for what we have been given—but during the holiday season, and in the circumstances the company found itself, the lesson was met with a higher measure of appreciation and solidified the power of friendship in all of us.



Audience Volunteers Spell Fun

Last summer nearly 200 audience members, including several MDC members, landed roles on our stage! Before each performance of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, Hal Cropp, who played Vice Principal Panch, roamed the lobby in costume, soliciting volunteers to participate as spellers. What were some reactions to that request?

“My friends and husband colluded against me,” said Cathy Baldner, admitting she then agreed to volunteer. Sarah Goff thought, “Oh no, that would be scary,” but did it anyway. David Banner simply said, “Heck yes!”

Presented as if the audience was watching an actual bee, the play used these pre-selected volunteers as contestants. When they misspelled words, they were escorted off stage with the cast’s humorously gentle farewell song: “You were good but not good enough. So don’t ask why, simply say goodbye.”

But at the end of the first act, the last volunteer left with unexpected special treatment. That happened to Kevin Kelleher when the entire cast sang exuberantly to the “best-looking dude we had all day.”

“I got to ‘act’ my disappointment all the way up to my seat,” he said, “where I fell into Fillmore County Commissioner Duane Bakke’s lap, pretending to cry. He was surprised, and we all had a good laugh.”

Scott Dixon: A Remembrance

On November 29 last year, the Commonweal Theatre lost one of our most beloved company members, Scott Roy Dixon. Almost from the first day he joined us in January of 2001, Scott became the heart and soul of the company. His work on stage, whether in serious, comic, or cross-gendered roles, always delighted. As a director he was always thoughtful, compassionate and open. His writing—five of his plays have captivated audiences—again reflected the generosity of spirit and open-hearted acceptance of all that makes up the human experience.

A faithful, loyal company member to the end, Scott never shirked what the company asked of him. When we needed someone to serve as company liaison—a sort of ombudsman to listen dispassionately to company members who might be experiencing disagreement and provide logical, even-handed counsel—Scott was there. The company needed someone to take on the burden of grant-writing—he stepped in without hesitation. There was a need for a Development Director—he gladly, if initially reluctantly, assumed the challenge. When circumstances called for someone to serve as an interim Executive Director for a short time, the answer was clearly Scott. Through it all, he embraced and embodied the concept of servant leadership.

Besides Scott’s warm heart and gentleness, his humor was ever-present. Puns flew frequently, practical jokes and stories were always ready to lighten the mood, and, in perhaps the most apocryphal of Scott stories, even when he was under tremendous stress in rehearsals trying to remember all he had to do to, including his lines, he blurted out what may be the funniest of ad libs. The spaces of the theater will never be without his watchword ad lib, “Chaircax.”

Scotty, rest in peace, knowing that you will never be far from our hearts.



Commonweal Apprentice Program in Its 11TH Year



The 2019 Apprentice Company. Left to right: Brandon Cayetano, Gabe Peñaloza-Hernandez, Lauren Schulke, Ian Sutherland.

Since 2008, more than 40 young artists have worked at the Commonweal through our apprentice program. Each spring they finish their 10-month residency with a Capstone project, a play they produce as well as perform. This season, Brandon Cayetano, Gabriel (Gabe) Peñaloza-Hernandez, Lauren Schulke and Ian Sutherland will stage *in a word* by Lauren Yee (the title is always written in lower case).

The apprentice program immerses participants in our unique artist-administrator model. Besides fulfilling their artistic duties, each of the apprentices spends approximately two months meeting weekly with three of our four major teams—Marketing, Development, Administration and Production. This shows them all aspects of running a professional theater from an artistic, financial and management perspective.

What are some things they've learned so far? Both Ian and Brandon say they now know that only about half of a typical theater's income comes from ticket sales, with the rest from donations. Lauren learned that time management is crucial when juggling both administrative and artistic duties, and Gabe discovered how our model, which often includes working in the lobby before a show, creates a closer relationship with our patrons.

For the Capstone project, the new artist-administrators pick a script, are given a budget and are in full charge of all aspects of production: direction, publicity and designing costumes, lights and sound. "The artist-administrator model is an effective way to give our apprentices a solid grounding in all aspects of theater," said Executive Director Hal Cropp. "We hope these skills will serve both them and the American theater well in the future." The program is supported in part with major contributions from MDC members Phil and Heidi Dybing, F&M Communi-

ty Bank, Gail and Phillip Minerich and David and Julie Warner.

in a word performs March 15th through 31st. For reservations call 800-657-7025 or order tickets online at our website.

Roles Played Outside

About five years ago, says Stela Burdt, she and Scott Dixon were considering moving because he wanted to pursue PhD studies in growing community through theater. "But then he thought, 'Why should I study it when I can live it right here at the Commonweal?'" she said.

Over the years company members have spent countless hours working outside the theater. Hal Cropp has served on the Lanesboro City Council, Economic Development Authority and was vice president of the Chamber of Commerce Board in 2018 when David Hennessey was its president. David has also been on the Library Board.

The past three years, Thomas White has set up and run sound systems for Memorial Day services at the Veteran's Cemetery in Preston. Stela Burdt often works with the Early Childhood and Family Education Program (ECFE). Brandt Roberts, who has a background in ministry, has led several lessons at Sunday services for the local Faith Discovery Community. This is the fourth consecutive year that Eric Lee has been the word pronouncer at the yearly Lanesboro Elementary School Spelling Bee. As the runner up in the 1984 Iowa State Fair Spelling Bee, he's proud of his role now. (Appropriately, he also performed in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*.)

Last season, Brandt, David and Adrienne Sweeney appeared on shows for Lanesboro Arts Center's *Over the Back Fence*, and Scott wrote two skits for them. And company members take turns delivering Meals on Wheels for five or six weeks each year.

As Hal Cropp says, "Enriching the common good is part of our mission statement, and working in the community comes out of that. It's part of our DNA."

Hal and David with the Chamber of Commerce.



Finances & Needs—Moving the Commonweal Forward

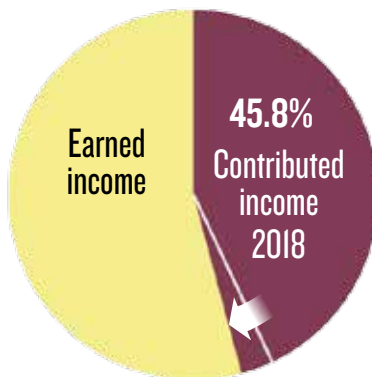
A year ago, the Board and Commonweal leadership set two initiatives in motion: increasing our patronage in key markets (those which lie within an hour’s drive of the theater), and increasing the amount of contributed income to better match the industry standard 50:50 relationship of earned to contributed income.

In 2018, progress was made on the contributed income side. Total contributed income was \$428,090, an increase of more than \$86,000 from the previous year. This success lay primarily in an increase in individual giving, in addition to a new foundation gift.

The Commonweal also made great strides bringing in more patrons. Serving 23,748 people, a full 62% of whom came from the seven counties surrounding Lanesboro, presenting 210 performances during the 2018 season was a monumental feat. We returned to a growth mode in main stage attendance from previous years, up to 21,430 versus 19,467 in 2017, 19,829 in 2016 and 20,979 in 2015.

Ending the year with a surplus, our total expenses were just under \$838,000, while revenues were nearly \$935,000. Industry-wide, theaters operate on a revenue mix which is 51% earned and 49% contributed income; theaters in our budget category (\$500K - \$1M) operate on an even more contribution-heavy mix: 42% earned to 58% contributed. In 2018 we achieved a ratio of 54.2% earned to 45.8% contributed income, an improvement of 2.8% over the previous year.

How will we continue to work toward that 50:50 ratio in



Contributed Income gain: 2.8%

2018 Performance Stats		
Stuart Pimsler Dance & Theatre	2 performances	103 patrons
Love Letters	2 perf's	403 patrons
Capstone: Salt-Water Moon	9 perf's	514 patrons
Student matinees	9 perf's	1,195 patrons
Main Stage— 5 productions	186 perf's	21,430 patrons
Artaria	2 perf's	103 patrons
TOTAL	210 perf's	23,748 people served
40 artists employed		

our income? Some might say that we should cut our expenses, particularly our staffing, since fully two-thirds of our budget is spent on labor costs. But consider that, while this may seem the logical fix, company members earn an average of only \$34,000 annually for full-time work. Seasonal artists earn \$250 per week. Apprentices get a weekly stipend of \$75. Directors and designers also get fees which range from \$1,000 to \$3,000 per production. The reality is that all of these people are essential to producing the quality of work and maintaining the relationships to our extended family that we currently enjoy.

We continue to believe that increasing our contributed income, as we grow our patronage, will bring the Commonweal to a position of financial strength. With the support of Commonweal family members like yourself, significant progress was made in 2018 on both challenges. For that, we thank you.

As the Board and staff recommit to these initiatives in 2019, we ask for your support. Together, we can assure the Commonweal’s success for generations to come.

Women and Diversity

We began our 2018 season by smashing some glass ceilings! With Ibsen on a well-deserved break, and the first show of the season now open to new possibilities, we were ready for something new. Enter Lauren Gunderson’s 2015 hit play, *Silent Sky*—the true story of Henrietta Leavitt, a pioneering American astronomer in a time when women weren’t even allowed to vote. The play chronicles Henrietta’s

life from her move to Harvard College, to work as a “computer,” to her untimely death to cancer at the age of 53. Though she received little recognition in her lifetime (along with fellow pioneering astronomers Williamina Fleming and Annie Jump Cannon), she was the first person to create a standard by which to measure stellar distances. After her death, Edwin Hubble (of Hubble Telescope fame) ➡



used her method to eventually prove that there are more galaxies than just the Milky Way.

Part of this play's beauty is the way the women celebrated one another's accomplishments. The 1918 photo of the Harvard Observatory staff (above) illustrates that these women knew they were stronger together. Any accomplishment made by one of them was shared by all women in science, underscoring the themes of feminism and the suffrage movement.

The *New York Times* dubbed 2018 as the "Year of the Woman," which made the timeliness of our production spot on. Producing the work of a living, female playwright was pretty exciting. And we did it twice! Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House* graced our stage from June to October.

If 2018 was the Year of the Woman, then 2017 was the Year of Lauren Gunderson, as she was the most produced playwright in North America that year (per *American Theatre Magazine*). A playwright and author from Atlanta, Georgia, she received her B.A. in English/Creative Writing from Emory University and her M.F.A. in Dramatic Writing from NYU Tisch. When she was asked about what message *Silent Sky* holds for audiences, she responded, "...that women aren't asking for special treatment, we are showing how special

we already are and always have been. We're not asking anyone to let us participate, we are exclaiming that we have participated in discoveries, breakthroughs and wild achievement." (Austin Playhouse)

One of the most meaningful moments in the show for many patrons was Annie Cannon's speech about women securing the right to vote. Many were arrested, jailed and even beaten. They endured all this so that women could be granted the same basic human right that men were granted by our U.S. Constitution. Annie says, "Does it say 'We the People' or doesn't it?" It was an inspiring show that the cast was grateful to be able to share with younger people who attended as part of our student matinee series. We're finally not just telling, but showing young girls that they have more options available to them than past generations.

That's not all she wrote! More playwrights like Gunderson are just around the corner. 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the passing of the 19th amendment. To celebrate, the Commonweal will present a season celebrating all facets of women's lives. A new wave awaits you in 2020. As Annie would say (with a little help from Lauren Gunderson), "It's about equality, and it's about time!"

It Takes a Village

Theatre is a collaborative art form, not only in its creation but in its support as well. Making art costs money, and many organizations and people step up to the plate to make our art happen—including you!

To our granting organizations, our board of directors, our MDC members, our season pass holders, our volunteers and all our many individual donors:

Thank You!

Our 2019 Board of Directors:

- Charles Aug—*President*
- Alan Bailey
- David Boen
- Harold N. Cropp—*Ex Officio*
- Barb DeCramer—*Treasurer*
- Jill Frieders—*Secretary*
- Chris Hanson
- Ron Kreinbring
- Wendy Mattison
- André Novak
- Sarah Peterson
- Jose Rivas
- Joan Ruen—*Vice President*
- P. J. Thompson

And thank you to theatregoers like you—your patronage makes live theatre possible!

