

COMMONWEAL THEATRE



Year in Review 2019



PROFESSIONAL LIVE THEATRE

A Year of Milestones

The first year of our fourth decade of producing outstanding professional theater for the great people of our region has been momentous on several fronts. As has been true for all 31 years of our work, the true heroes of this remarkable year are YOU, our audience and loyal supporters. Your commitment to the Commonwealth helped us to make tremendous strides towards our goal of creating sustainability for future generations.

Whether you sailed to tropics with us in *Peter and the Starcatcher* or scaled mountains with us in *On the Verge*, whether you sang along to *Sanders Family Christmas*, bust your gut with laughter at *Boeing Boeing* or sealed your lips with the secret of *Holmes and Watson*, your reactions are the fuel that drives us to greater artistic heights.

We have much to celebrate, but we cannot do it alone. Without the work of our many volunteers in costuming, front of house, and administration—and especially the volunteers who serve on our Board of Directors—we could not have achieved the milestones you'll read about in this newsletter.

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



Hal Cropp
Producing Artistic Director

The 2019 Commonwealth Resident Company & Friends



From left to right: Thomas White, Josiah Laubenstein, Rachel Kuhnle, Paul Epton (seasonal designer), Lizzy Andretta, David Hennessey, Alicia Ehleringer (2020 apprentice), Kelsey Heathcote, Ben Gorman, Hal Cropp, Philip Muehe, Adrienne Sweeney, Josiah Roberts, Jodi Rushing (2020 apprentice), Eric Lee, Jeremy van Meter, Betti Battocletti, Caroline Hawthorne (2020 apprentice), Elizabeth Dunn, Matt Donahue (2020 apprentice), Lacey Szerlip (2020 seasonal artist), Brandt Roberts, Stela Burdt, Alan Bailey (board of directors) and Lucy.

2019—Our Year in Review

In 2019, the Commonweal renewed its mission to enrich the common good as Season 31 started with the talent and expert playwriting skills of Jeffrey



Holmes and Watson

Hatcher. You will recall that Mr. Hatcher adapted several plays by Henrik Ibsen toward the end of our 20-year commitment to the production of those works. The mystery-thriller *Holmes and Watson* opened the season and delighted audi-

ences with its mix of suspense, humor and a thrilling and unexpected ending.

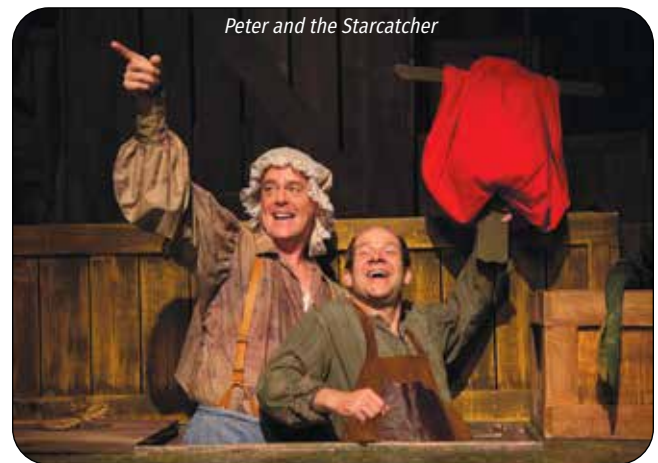
The spring of the year saw us jetting off to Paris of the 1960s for a slice of wacky nostalgia with *Boeing Boeing*. Who can forget the plight of Benard and his three flight attendant fiancées? We'll never forget the laughter rolling through the theatre as the nonstop madcap antics kept audiences on their toes. From the bright fashions, flashy airline luggage, beanbag weapons, and colorful characters, the hilarious chaos of the circus was an audience favorite and left us with nothing but smiles. And Adrienne Sweeney in a ginger-colored bob hairdo? Yes, please!



Boeing Boeing

As July arrived, we were ready to set sail with *Peter and the Starcatcher*, a magical tale about the bonds of friendship, filled with pirates and unlikely

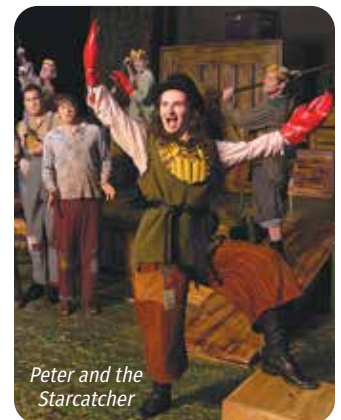
heroes. Our version of the play truly invoked the power of imagination as the Commonweal stage transformed into ship decks, oceans, jungles, a beach filled with beautiful (!) mermaids and an underwater grotto. The result was an enchanting reminder that while we all grow up, we can always stay young at heart. And, of course, the love affair between Eric Lee's Alf and Jeremy van Meter's Mrs. Bumbrake may have just stolen the show!



Peter and the Starcatcher

In the fall, *On the Verge* again transformed the Commonweal stage for a journey through time and space as Mary, Fanny, and Alexandra found themselves navigating through the new and unknown land of Terra Incognita. With its many inhabitants (in the capable hands of Brandt Roberts), the journey was one of testing both friendships and courage with the final destination being a heartening testament of the importance of one's true place in the world.

The holiday season rolled in and we welcomed it with the remount of Connie Ray's *Sanders Family Christmas*. We took you right back to join the congregation at Mount Pleasant Baptist Church as the Sanders Family bid farewell to Dennis Sanders headed to war overseas. The production under the direction of Alan Bailey (who also conceived the idea for the story) included the debut performance ➡



Peter and the Starcatcher



of Josiah Robinson on our stage. With his fiddle and mandolin playing skills, Josiah truly embodied the spirit of the Commonweal and quickly became a valued member of the ensemble. Toes tapped, hearts sang, and we all received a fantastic lesson in the power of family and significance of faith, appropriate themes for Christmastime and for Commonweal's entire 31st year.

“Toes tapped, hearts sang and we all received a lesson in the power of family.”



Engagement Tour: *Stones in His Pockets*



It's been several years now since the Commonweal last produced a touring show, bringing high quality, live professional theatre to communities outside our small borough. In 2019, thanks to a grant from the Southeastern Minnesota Arts Council, the Commonweal hit the road once more with the *Stones in his Pockets* Engagement Tour, bringing Irish playwright Marie Jones's powerful dark comedy to audiences in Austin, Rochester, La Crosse and Winona.

The Tour was a collaboration between Commonweal board and staff to introduce potential future audiences to the Commonweal Theatre on their own turf. These four cities were targeted as potential growth areas within a 60-mile radius of Lanesboro. The production featured resident ensemble members Hal Cropp and Josiah Laubenstein; it was directed by Rachel Kuhnle and stage managed and designed by Thomas White.

The tour served 313 people—387 including the 74 people from the pay-what-you-will performance onsite at the Commonweal.

Approximately 40 people attended the performance in Austin. Of the 29 pre-show event guests, 16 were totally new to the Commonweal Theatre. Of the 189 attendees at the Rochester performance at Mayo Clinic, 72 were new to the Commonweal. About 136 people attended the performance in La Crosse at the Pump House Regional Arts Center; of the 58 who attended the pre-show event, 19 were Commonweal newbies. In Winona, 29 of the 111 in attendance were entirely new to the Commonweal. The pay-what-you-will performance here at home raised an additional \$1,000 in donations.

Overall, by our numbers, the *Stones* Engagement Tour introduced 136 people to the Commonweal Theatre. We consider it an unqualified success!

Wealhouse: The New Kid on the Block

Several years ago a dream was sparked. What would it look like if the Commonweal ensemble could “break out” of the physical space in downtown Lanesboro and produce pieces of theatre in other venues either in or outside of the immediate

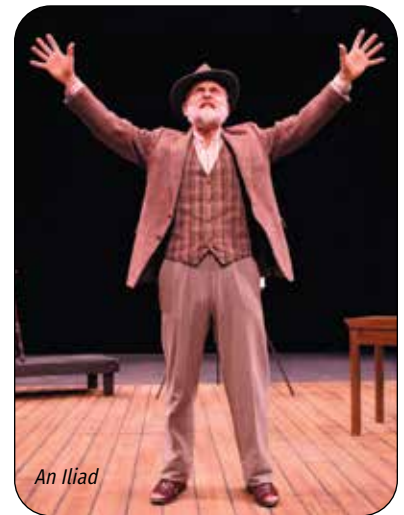


community? In 2019, that dream was finally realized: Wealhouse. We started with two productions, *Bakersfield Mist* and *An Iliad*. *Bakersfield Mist* featured the talents of husband and wife Hal Cropp and Adrienne Sweeney, with performances at the St. Mane in Lanesboro. *An Iliad* was a one-actor epic tale about the Trojan War with Ben Gorman in the role of the Poet, performed in the second-floor space above Pedal Pushers Café in downtown Lanesboro.

If audience size and word of mouth are any indications of the success of these debut productions, then our first foray into a second stage series was a grand one. *Bakersfield Mist* welcomed over 475 patrons in its run of eight performances. With only 26 seats in the Pedal Pushers space, *An Iliad* played to an audience of 220 over seven performances, one of which was held at the Commonweal auditorium to accommodate mobility-challenged patrons.

These results have energized the ensemble to continue the Wealhouse journey with two pieces slated for full productions in 2020. In mid-April and early May, Commonweal resident ensemble member Jeremy van Meter, under the direction of his wife, Catherine Glynn, will be featured in the solo performance piece *Circumference of a Squirrel*. Through multiple character voices, the journey of one man's turbulent relationship with his father is told with engaging humor and whimsy—along with stark realizations and bruising truths. It's a reminder that you can't choose your family, only the way you love them. The play will be produced at Lanesboro's Sons of Norway Lodge.

The second offering under the Wealhouse umbrella is a piece conceived by resident ensemble member Josiah Laubenstein entitled *My Eyes to Ask Again*. The concept, based on influential Japanese director Shogo Ota's poetic masterwork *The Water Station* (Mizu No Eki), utilizes a revolutionary style of slow tempo and silence to explore human relationships with the elements and each other. *My Eyes to Ask Again* continues in this tradition: through riveting slow movement and silent expressions, the play depicts the stories of travelers, unsettled and forced to move by an unspecified calamity, making their way to a public water spigot. This devised piece uses an approach to physical performance that incorporates a slow movement practice with an improvisational sensibility that encourages individuals to appreciate the moment-to-moment fact of one's “being here.”



An Iliad on Tour

Of the many successes that arose from the debut of Wealhouse in 2019 was the fact that Ben Gorman had such a powerful experience with telling the story that he was been inspired to share it with other communities across the country. The long story short is that Ben took *An Iliad* on tour! He contacted and made performance arrangements with four regional venues for the month of February, including Saturday, Feb. 8 at the Columbus Civic Theater in Columbus, Ohio; Monday, Feb. 17 at the Elks Theatre & Performing Arts Center in Prescott, Arizona; Friday & Saturday, Feb. 21 & 22 in Smithville, Texas; Thursday, Feb. 27 at The FireHouse Arts & Events Center in Bellingham, Washington. Not only did Wealhouse allow the Commonweal to expand into the “arts campus” of Lanesboro, but it is also allowing Ben the chance to spread the Commonweal name and spirit to other states. We can only imagine what the next set of Wealhouse artists will be inspired and motivated to accomplish.

Board of Directors Salute

In recent years, there has been a rash of bad news regarding the management and oversight of other nonprofit theater companies around the country. Many have even had to hold emergency fundraising campaigns to stave off elimination, and not all have been successful. Fortunately, the Commonweal continues to thrive. Against this backdrop it is instructive to examine and express gratitude for the work of a largely unsung group of volunteers, our Board of Directors.

Under the capable leadership of our Board president Charles Aug, these heroes of the Commonweal (Alan Bailey, David Boen, Barb DeCramer, Jill Frieders, Chris Hanson, Ron Kreinbring, Wendy Mattison, André Novack, Sarah Peterson, Jose Rivas, Joan Ruen and P.J. Thompson) have developed strategic initiatives designed to ensure the company’s long term stability. The board has assisted in increasing the percentage of contributed income to total income toward a 50/50 goal.

We owe special thanks here to retiring board member Barb DeCramer who has served tirelessly for two consecutive five-year terms and has shared her experience in development to provide much



Barb DeCramer

needed guidance. We also welcome back to our Board Ron Kreinbring who re-joins us after his year-long hiatus. Board members have overseen the creation of both a cash reserve fund and a building fund (designed to cover maintenance issues on both of the company’s properties). They have articulated a process for succession, both in emergency situations and as it pertains to the current producing artistic director’s retirement. They have also become active participants in our production season selection.

Our debt of gratitude is even greater when you consider that our board is comprised of volunteers. Attendance at lengthy board meetings, participation on board committees, attendance at various social functions, and participation in the annual board retreat are totally uncompensated. Yet their efforts have been and continue to be instrumental in the ongoing success of the company.

Theatre District Mural

With two active theatre spaces side by side, Lanesboro will soon see a “theatre district” mural celebrating local performing arts and reflecting the town’s heritage. The vibrant mural will be installed in May on the south wall of the Manion Law office building, right next to the St. Mane and Commonweal.

Last spring Lanesboro Arts and the Commonweal invited residents to a brainstorming session to generate ideas of what the mural could depict. Artist Erik Pearson took that input and designed a 1,000-square-foot painting. In October 2019, more than 200 community volunteers—including more than 100 from Lanesboro Public Schools—joined Pearson to paint the mural onto parachute cloth, which was then placed in storage for the winter. In the spring it will be mounted in a manner similar to applying wallpaper—a process requiring warmer temperatures.



Erik Pearson

“We want...to ensure that this unique piece of public art can be enjoyed by our community as long as it possibly can,” noted Lanesboro Arts Advancement Director Kara Maloney.

The dedication, on a date to be announced, will include community-wide festivities and interpretative signage to contextualize the mural for passersby.

“This tribute to the performing arts here is a distinctive addition to the Lanesboro Arts Campus” said Commonweal Producing Artistic Director Hal Cropp. Pearson said, “When art is everywhere, it changes the meaning and feeling of the downtown area and makes people explore more.”



Theatre District mural (mockup)

Finances & Needs—Moving the Commonweal Forward

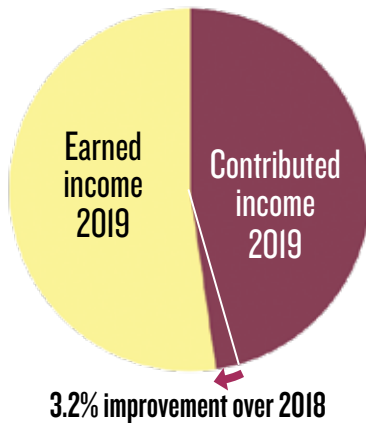
2019 was a momentous year for the Commonweal, with two major milestones achieved! Total revenues exceeded \$1,000,000 for the first time in our history and we retired the mortgage on our Artists' Residence. In addition, at the board's direction, we created a cash reserve fund and a modest building fund.

We continue to advance the two initiatives our Board and leadership set before the company: increasing our patronage in our key markets (those which lie within an hour's drive of the theater), and increasing the amount of contributed income to approach the 50/50 relationship of earned to contributed income. With your help, we've made great strides on both initiatives. In 2019, the Commonweal served 24,906 people (62% of whom came from the seven counties surrounding Lanesboro) via 227 performances. We continued in a growth mode in mainstage attendance against previous years, up 2.7% over 2018.

We ended 2019 with a surplus—our total expenses were just over \$878,000, while revenues were just over \$1,001,000. Industry-wide, theatres operate on a revenue mix which is 53% earned and 47% contributed income; theatres in our budget category (\$500K - \$1M) operate on an even more contribution-heavy mix: 35% earned to 65% contributed. In 2019 we achieved a ratio of 51% earned to 49% contributed income, an improvement of 6% since the start of the campaign in 2017. Most of this gain was attributable to two non-repeatable factors: a two-year grant from the Carl and Verna Schmidt Foundation of \$100,000 and the successful drive to raise \$60,000 to retire the aforementioned mortgage on the Artists' Residence.

Retiring the mortgage allows us to direct more resources into operations while maintaining this vital resource. The Artists' Residence allows us to supplement the wages and stipends we offer to seasonal artists and apprentices with comfortable living spaces at no charge. It also houses our costume studio and storage for set pieces and furniture, costumes and props. Many thanks to the friends of the company who helped us secure this most vital asset.

One of the most essential and rewarding pro-



2019 Performance Stats

Wealhouse launch: <i>Bakersfield Mist</i>	10 perf's	477 patrons
Wealhouse: <i>An Iliad</i>	7 perf's	220 patrons
Engagement Tour: <i>Stones in His Pockets</i>	5 perf's	387 patrons
Apprentice Capstone: <i>in a word</i>	10 perf's	449 patrons
Student matinees	9 perf's	1,363 patrons
Main Stage—5 productions	186 perf's	22,010 patrons

TOTAL 227 perf's 24,906 people served

43 artists employed

grams we offer is our Apprenticeship Program. These young theatre professionals come to us to learn the principles and practices of the artist/administrator. Every season, new apprentices get mainstage assignments alongside members of our resident ensemble, and cycle through the four functional teams of the company: marketing, development, administration and production. Towards the end of each year's program, the apprentices together choose and produce a capstone project, applying the knowledge and skills they've gained in a practical application. Each apprentice receives a stipend and housing; the annual cost to the company is \$7,500. Fortunately, we have had a number of kind donors come forward to underwrite three apprentice positions, for which we are deeply grateful. There is still room for further participation, as we're looking to grow the program to six apprentices.

As we move forward, the Board and staff have recommitted to last year's two initiatives. We ask for your support, as together we work to assure the Commonweal's success for generations to come. With the support of Commonweal family members like yourself, significant progress was made in 2019 on both challenges. For that, we thank you.



Hal Cropp accepts the retired mortgage from Board Chair Chuck Aug on the porch of the Artists' Residence.

Comings & Goings

Theatre is an ephemeral art form—each performance “has its day” and is gone. Though we’re luckier than most to have a resident company where staff stays for the long term, even we aren’t immune from the changing nature of theatre. With that in mind, we bid fond farewells to some departing company members and are thrilled to welcome new arrivals!

Bailey Otto’s first show was *A Doll’s House* in 2013—one of 20 productions she stage managed as a member of our production team. She is now Administrative Assistant at the Lanesboro Area Chamber of Commerce.

Eric Lee, who first appeared in *Arsenic & Old Lace* in 2014, has moved to the Twin Cities. While here, he was in 12 shows, served our Marketing Team, represented us for the Lanesboro Business Promotion Group and volunteered as word reader for the Lanesboro Elementary spelling bee.

A veteran of more than 50 Commonweal productions, David Hennessey is now in his 21st year here but will now serve on a reduced schedule as he goes into semi-retirement. He will continue managing program advertisements and do editing tasks. He looks forward to performing in *One Man, Two Guvnors*.

After finishing her apprenticeship this spring, Jodi Rushing will join the resident company as an Administrative Assistant. She will serve on the production team and continue as stage manager for *An Iliad* whenever it tours in our region.

An actor, director, playwright and costume designer, Jaclyn Johnson is working half-time, preparing to take over next year as Development Manager. She

was previously Co-Artistic Director at the St. Croix Festival Theatre. She currently lives in Madison, WI.

Give For Scott Campaign

In November of 2018, the entire Commonweal family lost a valued member in Scott Dixon as he moved beyond where cancer could hurt him. While the grieving process continues for many of us, the work we are engaged in to enrich the common good remains stronger than ever because of his memory.

January 15, 2020, would have been Scott’s 50th birthday. Going forward, we’ve decided to honor that date by launching an initiative that allows Scott’s friends and fans to support the Commonweal in future Wealhouse productions. It gives us great pleasure to announce that this past January 15, the first **Give For Scott** campaign, a total of over \$6,000 was received from 73 generous contributors as of this printing. Thank you for ensuring that Wealhouse will remain a viable dream for many years to come.



Scott Dixon at the Dracula Page to Stage event, 2018.

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!

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

2020 Board of Directors:

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

WISCONSIN PUBLIC RADIO

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

MINNESOTA STATE ARTS BOARD

F&M Community BANK

WE MAKE BANKING EASY™

MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION