

# COMMONWEAL THEATRE



**Year in  
Review  
2020**



**Professional Live Theatre**

## 2020—A Year Unlike Any Other

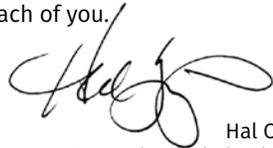
2020—a year many of us might wish to place squarely in our rearview mirror. It began auspiciously enough. On January 3rd, we retired the mortgage on Dixon House, our artists' residence. Shortly thereafter, we waded full steam into a season ticket sales campaign, which yielded our highest season pass total ever, with over 1,400 subscribers. Our apprentices, ably aided by ensemble members Brandt Roberts and Kelsey Heathcote, spent eight weeks crafting a haunting piece of theater, Alan Miller's *The Fox*, and we were able to present one preview and one public performance before the coronavirus brought all of life to a screeching halt.

From there, we spent the better part of the spring planning and communicating; developing new skills in writing, vid-

eography, and voice talent; and striving to stay connected to you, our audience and loyal supporters. Your commitment to us and our work helped us to successfully pivot, crafting six new pieces of virtual entertainment, keeping our ensemble together and employed, and allowing us to make plans for an exciting and safe 2021.

The stories that follow will amplify the many accomplishments we achieved together in 2020.

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



Hal Cropp  
Producing Artistic Director



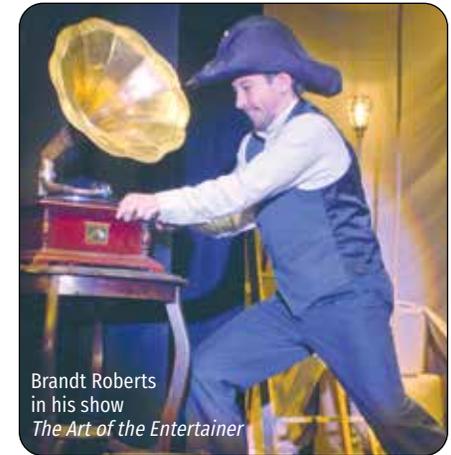
**The 2020 Commonweal Resident Company**

During 2020 we became Zoom meeting experts. Even Santa got in on the act.

## 2020—Our Year in Review

At the beginning of the new year in 2020, all of us at the Commonweal had high hopes and a spring in our step. We had just come off of one of the most successful seasons in our history with a record number of season pass holders, a firm financial footing, and a strong lineup of fantastic plays to share with you. In a matter of weeks, a national pandemic spread, live theatre closed all across the country, and our hopes turned to uncertainty and a canceled season. We were left with no other option than to...pivot. Suddenly, we needed to find impactful stories that we could share virtually with our devoted family of patrons.

First, we collaborated with Lanesboro Arts, along with local theatre director/producer and former Commonweal ensemble member Catherine Glynn and three of her Audacious Raw Theatre company artists, to produce



Brandt Roberts  
in his show  
*The Art of the Entertainer*

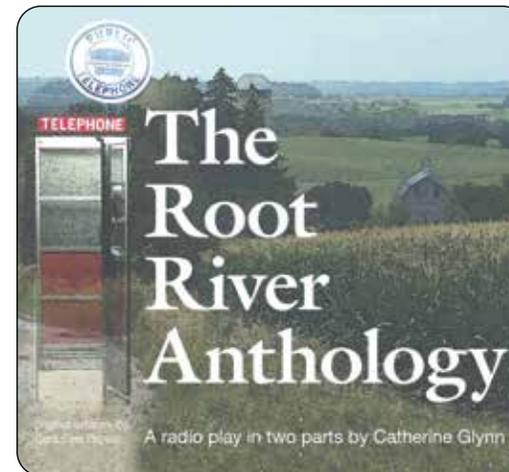
mindful of the importance of staying connected to one another.

In July, we were thrilled to bring to living rooms across the country yet another original play redeveloped for the virtual world, *The Art of the Entertainer*

by resident ensemble member Brandt Roberts. Following the exploits of Gerald the janitor, Brandt's work was an homage to vaudeville that left us all wondering how one man can channel Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, and Laurel & Hardy in one body!

The excitement of solo performance extended into the fall of 2020 with *Fully Committed* by Becky Mode, featuring our own Josiah Laubenstein—and Josiah Laubenstein, along with Josiah Laubenstein. With tour-de-force talent and a string of outrageous and unforgettable characters,

*Fully Committed* had us all rooting for Sam to get out from behind the desk and burst onto the stage. Plus, we'll not soon forget Josiah as Manhattan



*The Root River Anthology*. Told with humor, engaging storytelling, and a tinge of heartache, the story introduced us to a wide range of neighbors who re-

socialite Carolann Rosenstein-Fishburn. The only thing missing was Josiah in the full costume and makeup to go with the voice!



Cast, crew & set of *Fully Committed*

In November, *Headspace Theatre* took us on a journey of the mind. Communicating only with their heads and faces, our seven headspace actors fit perfectly into a season in which we couldn't gather in person, and it taught us the lesson that the best art comes from working within extremely specific and defined limits. The neon heart sprouting from the head of David Hennessey...yeah, that may have just stolen the show.

During the holiday season, creativity and inventiveness were truly put on display when nine ensemble members created, from the ground up, *A Driftless Christmas*, an original work of stories, music, and reflections on Christmases past and the impact of the present-day holiday. We know that last Christmas was a bit "driftless" and not the same for any of us, but we took great comfort in doing what we do best—telling great stories. We hope and pray that you took comfort in that, too.



Taping *Headspace Theatre*

And now with a new year, we pivot to another season, with some lingering uncertainty but with renewed high hopes and still relying on that same great creativity you love us for. We're giddy with excitement at the thought of gathering together again—in person—to share five fabulous stories with you. We kick off 2021 with a delectable comedy, dance to the unlikeliest of romances, toss in a madcap Shakespearean parody for the summer, weave in an offbeat comedy about love and loss, and conclude with a holiday classic featuring a welcome twist! It's a grand season of reconnection and it's right around the corner at the Commonweal.

**“We took great comfort in doing what we do best—telling great stories.”**

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### Diversity Workshop: Leilani Raashida Henry

On August 25th, 2020, after many hours of careful planning around COVID-19 risk mitigation, after screening for symptoms and taking temperatures, after months of avoiding gathering en masse and finally having protocols in place to do so carefully

within our organization and our community. It was a dynamic eight hours. Because of the guests' willingness to share their knowledge and open their hearts to our good intentions, we heard first-hand experiences of racism. We spent time acknowledging and identifying micro-aggressions we, as white people, observed (and even perpetuated), and we learned new skills around how to acknowledge what we heard, inquire about intention, endorse new ways of thinking, and reinforce how appreciated and impactful a new way of thinking or acting would be.



A group exercise during the workshop

Leilani expressed the necessary shifts which would have to

and safely, the Commonweal Resident Ensemble, several Board members, and a few special guest speakers met in the auditorium. We discussed how, as individuals and as an organization, we could begin the work of celebrating diversity, exercising equity, practicing inclusion, and embodying anti-racism. Leilani Raashida Henry of Being and Living Enterprises ushered participants through a series of (socially distanced and masked) exercises and discussions on the theme of Multiversity: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in our work as theatre artists.

take place within, shifts that would allow a meaningful dialog to commence. With an aim to inspire collective exploration through conversation in which truth and meaning could be uncovered through collaboration and deep listening, Leilani spoke of becoming a participant and a learner. She asked us to reject our feelings of competence to make room for vul-

The workshop had several goals designed to create safe and healing conversations around race and to "generate a new narrative, foster awareness, and inspire bold woke leadership"



Leilani Raashida Henry

of becoming a participant and a learner. She asked us to reject our feelings of competence to make room for vul-

### Diversity Workshop

nerability, and in doing so, shift from arrogance to humility. We participated in dialog which allowed us to listen and reflect, to approach ideas and confusion with curiosity and advocacy, and to suspend judgment.

This practice of challenging assumptions through dialog gave us a foundation to build upon. From here, we have a responsibility to continue the work individually, in our organization, and in our community. Dedicating time to this effort allowed us to see how diversity, equity and inclusion make us better artists and more compassionate community members.

Our workshop ended with time to envision ways we can apply these values to our work at the Commonweal. Working in small groups, we incorporated the day's lessons by discussing, creating, and producing theatre that

would reflect our anti-racist learning. It will take time, intention, vulnerability, and patience to apply the efforts of equity and inclusion to all aspects of our work at the Commonweal, but it felt good as a company to begin that work together, with our hearts full and our minds engaged in being a part of the change we wish to see in the world.



Rochester poet Dominique Jones shared his work.

### Comings & Goings

In July, Production Manager Thomas White left the company to rejoin his husband, Bryan, in Waterloo, IA. They both now work at an assisted living facility, Deery Suites at the Western Home Communities. As Lead Hospitality Coordinator, he is responsible for ordering, storing and serving food for 40 to 60 residents. Since he coordinated all our productions, he had no problem adjusting to this new organizing challenge. He'll be back to design lights for *A Christmas Carol* and is looking forward to and frequenting the Pastry Shoppe again.

Jackie Johnson joined us at the start of 2020 as Production Manager while also helping to manage the costume shop. Most recently, she was Teaching Artist at the Pre-school of the Arts in Madison, WI, after spending almost a decade at St. Croix Festival Theatre, rising to Artistic Director. "I had long heard the praises of the Commonweal," she says. "And as an artist with strengths in administration and leadership, I was grateful to find one of the few theatres with this business model."

Rivka Kelly arrived halfway through our canceled season in July, having formerly been Assistant Stage Manager at American Players Theatre, Spring Green, WI. This season she will stage manage all our rehearsals and the performances for two productions. What brought her here? "I saw the Commonweal job posting in February, and my visit here is what really sold it to me," she says. "I felt such a strong sense of togetherness and welcoming as soon as I entered the building!"

### Board of Directors Salute

The past year has been one of unprecedented challenges for nonprofits around the country. The Commonweal is not unique. As we wrestled with the dilemmas of when or whether to open, whether to keep staff employed, and how to maintain relevance as an organization pursuing our mission, one key group of volunteers has been willing to provide excellent guidance and the fortitude to look this catastrophe squarely in the face. Against this backdrop, it is instructive to examine and express gratitude for the work of a largely un-

sung group of volunteers, our Board of Directors.



Jill Frieders

Under the capable leadership of our Board president Joan Ruen, these heroes of the Commonweal

(Chuck Aug, Alan Bailey, David Boen, Jill Frieders, Chris Hanson, Ron Kreinbring, Wendy Mattison, André Novack, Sarah Peterson, José Rivas, and P. J. Thompson, Laura Gentry and Mary Wilder) have been engaged in developing strategic initiatives designed to assure the company's long-term stability. As reflected elsewhere in this report (see "Finances and Needs"), they have assisted in increasing the percentage of contributed income to total income toward the stated 50:50 goal. They 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 a planned outgrowth of the company's longevity. They have become active participants in season selection.

All of this effort has been done as true volunteers. Attendance at bi-monthly Board meetings (which last anywhere from 1.5 to 3 hours), 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.

We would be remiss if we did not salute the service of Jill Frieders, retiring Board member, who worked tirelessly to expand the patron base of the company in the greater Rochester area and who served as Board Secretary for most of her term. Jill, many thanks and don't be a stranger.

Please welcome Mary Wilder, Executive Director of Gift of Life Transplant House in Rochester. Mary comes to use with a passion for the theatre and years of experience in the non-profit sector. Also, please welcome Laura Gentry, Lutheran minister and master teacher of laughter yoga, to our Board. Laura and her husband William have been long-time supporters



Mary Wilder

### Board Salute

of the Commonweal, and we are sure to benefit from her wise counsel.



Laura Gentry, husband William and Fuji.

### MDC Benefits

#### Thank you to our MDC Members!

Thank you so much for all you do to support the work of the Commonweal Theatre. You are at the heart of this company, providing a strong foundation for 32 years of awards, service, and professional excellence.

As we look ahead to the hopefulness of our 33rd season, we want to remind you of the benefits offered to MDC members and update you on some changes for this year. We know that you give because you believe in our work and our mission to *enrich the common good through actor-based storytelling which is both transcendent and relevant*, but we try never to miss an opportunity to show our appreciation for all that you do for us.

#### All MDC members receive:

- ★ 2 tickets to any show, anytime (one ticket for single-head-of-household membership)
- ★ \$10 off regular Adult tickets for guests for any show, anytime
- ★ Complimentary ticket vouchers, upon request, to give to people who

have a strong potential to join the MDC program.

- ★ Season passes to give as gifts anytime at the discounted renewal price of \$99 for 2021! Normally, this rate is available only for a limited time, but MDC members can purchase discounted season passes anytime. Call our box office at (800) 657-7025 to purchase gift passes, or tell your friends to mention your name when ordering to receive this special offer.
- ★ For more information or assistance, contact Jeremy van Meter at (507) 467-2905 ext. 211 or email at: jeremyvm@commonwealththeatre.org

### Important 2021 MDC COVID Updates

Watch your mailbox for a 2021 season brochure and a letter that will detail safe reopening plans and temporary changes to your MDC benefits. For any questions contact: Jeremy van Meter at (507) 467-2905 ext. 211 or email at: jeremyvm@commonwealththeatre.org



Hal with MDC members Joe and Lois Duffy at his 25th Season celebration.

### Stela's Clear Blue Morning Cabaret

In 2018, our dear friend and colleague Scott Dixon passed away following a battle with cancer. Scott made an indelible mark on each person he met and gave of himself fully to every project he undertook.



We still miss him terribly, but we're extremely proud to announce the launch of The Scott Dixon Memorial Fund. Donations made to the fund will help support projects that were the nearest and dearest to Scott's heart during his time as a resident ensemble member of the Commonweal. Those include educational programs like the Apprentice class production and the student matinee series, the cultivation of new plays by contemporary playwrights, focusing on the resident ensemble's strong impact on the local economy, and his most passionate project, Wealhouse, our second stage series that debuted in 2019.

To help kick off the inaugural year of the fund in 2020, our friend Alan Bailey conceived a cabaret-style event featuring Scott's wife, Stela Burdt. As pandemic restrictions continued to tighten, it became apparent that an in-person fundraising event would have to transition to a virtual one. And so, many hours of recording and filming by the entire company were undertaken to produce a collection of 11 songs chronicling both Stela's story of courage and strength as well as the Commonweal's own story of overcoming a year of challenges. The result was *Stela's Clear Blue Morning*, and it is an understatement to say that it was a most successful way to launch The Scott Dixon Memorial Fund. The musical journey was uplifting and joyful as well as touching and reflective—and we know that Scott would be the prouder of it than anyone.

For more information on the memorial fund and to make your donation, please visit the Donate page at [www.CommonwealTheatre.org/donate](http://www.CommonwealTheatre.org/donate).



Stela, Scott and Kieran

## Finances & Needs

As alluded to in our introduction, 2020 was a unique year for the Commonweal, and it looked as if we would have another banner year. We ended 2019 with the strongest cash position in our history, and by March 1 our subscription base had grown to over 1,400. And then the pandemic hit.

We spent much of the spring trying to hold our ensemble together, with frequent messaging about our continually evolving plans for re-opening. We joked that this was our week for much of the spring:

- Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday: draft plans;
- Thursday: listen to the Governor;
- Friday: rip up the plans and start over.

Thankfully, 93.4% of our subscribers either converted their passes into straight donations or accepted vouchers for tickets for upcoming productions.

These funds, along with generous donations from our entire extended Commonweal family, some judicious cost-cutting, CARES Act support from county and state government, and a forgivable Payroll Protection Plan grant, allowed us to keep our ensemble working. We were able to fund six virtual projects, assuring that Commonweal storytelling would not be silent over the past year.

Ending the year with a surplus, our total expenses were just over \$680,779, while revenues were just over \$772,820. While we continue to keep an eye on the earned income/contributed income ratio, 2020's figures cannot be used as a measuring stick: contributed income in 2020 amounted to 92.4% of total revenue.

While we face uncertainty as to both when we can re-open to our extended

family and also when many of you will be comfortable returning to the Commonweal in person to share our stories, we are planning a somewhat austere 2021 season, attempting to keep our expenses low by staging plays that will only feature our resident ensemble and severely limiting the number of outside artists (actors, directors, and designers) whom we will engage. We have also put our Apprenticeship Program on hiatus.

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 2020 on the contributed income challenge. For that, we thank you. We also recognize that it will take some time to realize a return to patronage levels we saw in 2019, but with your support we surely will be back there.

As we move forward, the Board and staff have recommitted to the past years' two initiatives: increasing the amount of contributed income to come closer to the 50:50 ratio of earned-to-contributed income and increasing patronage in our key markets. We ask for your support, as together we work to assure the Commonweal's success for generations to come.



We can't wait to see you here again!

## Our 33rd Season

### I Love To Eat

by James Still

April-June

*A delectable comedy*

### Dancing Lessons

by Mark St. Germain

May-August

*The unlikelyst of romances*

### The Complete Works of W<sup>m</sup> Shakespeare (Abridged) [Revised]

July-Oct

*A madcap parody*

by Adam Long, Daniel Singer & Jess Winfield

### Come Back

Sept-Nov

by Neil Haven

*An offbeat comedy about love & loss*

### A Christmas Carol

Nov-Dec

by Charles Dickens

adapted by the Commonweal

*A holiday classic—with a twist!*

## Let Our Audience SEE Your Business!

**Our programs this year will be online, not in print, and they will include clickable links (when available) to make them interactive!**

### Put an ad in our season program—

- For the entire year or for specific shows!
- Help sponsor our five County Free nights for workers & residents in Fillmore & Houston Counties!
- Have your name mentioned in the pre-show speech!
- See your name appearing in our lobby video!
- Underwrite an entire production!
- Your logo on the program title page!
- Your name mentioned in the post-show speech!

#### For more information, contact us:

##### Program ads—

David Hennessey, 507-467-2905 ex 205, [advertising@commonwealththeatre.org](mailto:advertising@commonwealththeatre.org)

##### Sponsors & Underwriters—

Jeremy van Meter, 507-467-2905 ex 212, [jeremyvm@commonwealththeatre.org](mailto:jeremyvm@commonwealththeatre.org)



Here's to YOU, our Commonweal Family!

## 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!

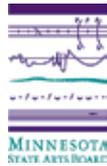
To our granting organizations, our board of directors, our MDC members, our season pass holders, our volunteers and all our many individual donors:

### 2021 Board of Directors:

- Charles Aug
- Alan Bailey
- David Boen—*Treasurer*
- Harold N. Cropp—*Ex Officio*
- Laura Gentry
- Chris Hanson
- Ron Kreinbring

- Wendy Mattison—*Vice President*
- André Novack
- Sarah Peterson
- José Rivas—*Secretary*
- Joan Ruen—*President*
- P. J. Thompson
- Mary Wilder

## Thank You!



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