Excellence in CORAL GABLES

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Companies’ Expertise
Actors’ Playhouse At the Miracle Theatre

Going strong in its 30th season in 2017-18, Actors’ Playhouse, a regional professional theatre company in Miami-Dade County, and one of the County’s major cultural institutions, is Coral Gables’ very own performing arts center. Located in the downtown central business district as the main anchor on Miracle Mile, Actors’ Playhouse attracts so much attention from residents and visitors, that area restaurants enjoy 25% increased business when the theatre is in production. Actors’ Playhouse is the GO TO THEATRE DESTINATION in South Florida.

The History of Actors’ Playhouse

In early 1988 in the Kendall area of southwest Miami-Dade County, dentist Lawrence E. Stein treated a patient named Michael Brown who happened to own a movie theater – part of the Wometco chain – in the Kendall Mall. When Brown mentioned he had a buyer for the space, Stein said, “Hold the sale, and I will purchase the lease to bring culture to South Dade.”

Stein came from Philadelphia where he had attended live theatre regularly growing up. Within a week, he owned the lease to the twin-screen theater and began the process of converting it into a professional live theatre space. From that day forward, Lawrence and Barbara Stein invested in improving the community by creating what is now Miami-Dade County’s largest professional regional theatre company.

Heading into its 30th year, the Actors’ Playhouse organization has survived and developed after being initially established in a shopping mall, destroyed by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, and buffeted by the ups and downs of the South Florida economy during the financial crisis of 2008-09.
Barbara Stein has won many awards beginning in 1962 as Outstanding Teen Age Citizen of Miami-Dade County and considers her main skill to be “getting people together.” She found people in the theater industry, who “understood the dream” and with her husband realized the dream of owning a space to produce musical theater that didn’t exist in South Florida. On February 3, 1988 they opened Actors’ Playhouse with their first production, Man of La Mancha.

Initially, the company produced three musicals that season. In the second season the program grew to six, but before that happened, things became more difficult. According to Barbara, a mall location isn’t ideal for creating an audience for musical theater, and “venue is the key.” But they managed until Hurricane Andrew devastated much of South Florida and destroyed the first Actors’ Playhouse.

“We always knew that someday we would be out of the strip mall.” The opportunity came in 1995 when a buyer wanted the suburban location. That allowed the Steins to pursue with Michael Brown and Art Hertz of Wometco - who owned one final movie property, the Miracle Theatre in Coral Gables - their plan for a performing arts center not located in a mall.

The theater was rebuilt, but, says Barbara, “we always knew that someday we would be out of the strip mall.” Thanks to the foresight of Commissioners Dorothy Thomson, William Kardyk, Sr. Jim Barker, and Chip Wehres, and Mayor Raúl J. Valdés-Fauli, Actors’ Playhouse acquired “a historic building” where they opened their first show on November 17, 1995. Once again, it was Man of La Mancha on the Mainstage. Two years later Actors’ Playhouse added the Balcony theater on the second floor.

With space for an audience of 300, the Balcony gives flexibility for smaller productions than the ground level Mainstage with 600 seats. A tiny black box theater also on the second floor provides space for theater workshops.

The Steins and their Board of Directors began discussions with Coral Gables officials about partnering to renovate and restore the Miracle Theatre and turn it into a 3-stage performing arts center. Given community support for Actors’ Playhouse, City Commissioners voted to award a 40-year lease. “The City Fathers were aware they had to bring foot traffic to Miracle Mile,” explains Stein, and adds that the theater acted as a catalyst to bring in Starbucks, the first one in the State of Florida, and Barnes & Noble, both of which are now surrounded by restaurants and boutiques of various types on the Mile.

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Developing Actors’ Playhouse in Coral Gables

A big step forward was the hiring of David Arisco as Artistic Director. He arrived to direct one show and stayed. He has now been with Actors’ Playhouse almost as long as the Steins. Their initial plans called for starting “the first real children’s theater” in the area with Earl Maulding as director — also with the organization since day one — which has proved very successful, leading to weekend workshops and spring break and summer theater camps for children and teenagers. Among the 150,000 who attend the Miracle Theatre annually for Actors’ Playhouse productions and rentals to outside organizations, 60,000 are children in youth programs.

While Lawrence Stein is Founding Chairman, Barbara Stein as Executive Producing Director manages the entire...
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operation of Actors’ Playhouse and is responsible for hiring, training, and developing the team of 25 full-time and 22 part-time employees behind the scenes of the productions.

With five Mainstage productions and five Children’s Theater productions each season, everyone is more than busy. But since the team has been together for 30 years, Stein is working with people she knows well who are entirely committed to the mission of bringing top-notch musical and dramatic theater to Coral Gables and South Florida.

It hasn’t been easy. Mounting five Mainstage and five children’s productions per year is like building 11 houses per year, says Stein. Each production requires brand new sets, costumes, and actors. Because Actors’ Playhouse is an Equity Regional Theater, it must use in each production a ratio of Equity actors whose fees are negotiated with Actors’ Equity Association of New York, the union for professional actors. For a large musical like Ragtime in 2015 or West Side Story in 2016, at least 50 percent of professional actors. For a large musical like Ragtime in 2015 or West Side Story in 2016, at least 50 percent of the performers must be members of Equity, creating a large financial outlay for the Playhouse before a single ticket has been sold. Using only live orchestras in its productions increases expenses substantially, but because of its professionalism, Actors’ Playhouse musical productions are renowned throughout South Florida.

The continued success of Actors’ Playhouse depends on high-quality productions and the financial and in-kind support of the community. In South Florida theatrical excellence is acknowledged at the Carbonell Awards in early April. Productions at Actors’ Playhouse have received 87 Carbonell Awards and many more nominations including those for “Best Production of a Musical,” as well as supporting actors, directors (most often Arisco), and technical staff.

Actors’ Playhouse is popular in Coral Gables and beyond among the people who love musical theater and appreciate how well it is done. Stein calls her audiences, “a total congregation of people in this community.” She and her team have “touched the hearts of a lot of people,” including officials from Miami-Dade County and the State of Florida who make grants to performing arts companies.

The money is needed because Barbara Stein is not one to stand still. The building requires constant maintenance like many of the older buildings in the city, in 2015 after a series of unusually heavy rains, the roof needed repairs. Refurbishing the historic wooden walls inside, upgrading technical sound and lighting equipment, and replacing the carpet in the lobby and on the stairs are planned. Not this year but soon, seats in the main auditorium will need to be replaced.

Looking forward, she hopes to get funding for a third story to allow for fly space, an aerial tunnel so that sets can be raised above as well as dropped below during scene changes. “This addition will complete the Miracle Theatre as a true performing arts center,” says Stein.

Barbara’s goals are to create a “good succession plan,” build an infrastructure for the theater’s leadership, manage historic archives, develop the organization with an ongoing planned giving campaign, and grow the reserves.

“We have received public funds,” Stein says. “It is our obligation to guarantee that the institution will continue to succeed and grow stronger.” Coral Gables and South Florida overall are a “young community for appreciating theater,” she explains in talking about her plan to add “an alternate program for new plays worthy of development.” This is important to expand the reach and professionalism of theater in South Florida and introducing the audiences to new material. She’s confident this is possible because, “we are slowly and steadily developing loyal and supportive audiences.”

The quality of life in a community comes not only from the housing, schools, and jobs it offers residents, but also from the richness of cultural institutions. For many people who live and/or work in Coral Gables the presence of Actors’ Playhouse along with art galleries, museums, and historic buildings is valuable. “We program to benefit the community,” says Stein, and with global marketing, a reputation for artistic excellence, and business acumen, “people from all over the world” come to see our shows.
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www.actorsplayhouse.org