

## New and Old, Suburban Performing Arts Venues Offer Spectacular Settings

### NORTH CENTRAL COLLEGE

Two years ago the college dedicated the \$30 million Wentz Concert Hall and Fine Arts Center, and a year before that it dedicated Meiley-Swallow Hall, home to a theatre and art gallery. So the arts are in full bloom here with 100 annual events.

Upcoming headliners include the Vienna Boys Choir, Preservation Hall Jazz Band and the Ides of March. Since 2011 is the college's sesquicentennial, the 2011-12 schedule will include a bevy of well-known performers.

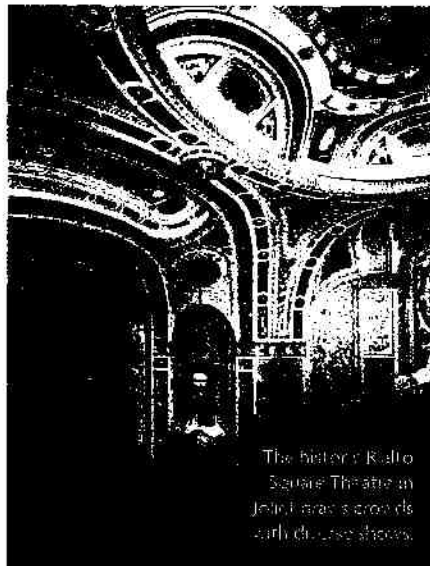
### MCANINCH ARTS CENTER, COLLEGE OF DUPAGE

The McAninch Arts Center — or the MAC as it is more commonly called — drew nearly 65,000 patrons last year for theatre, music, dance and the visual arts. The numbers are comparable to 2009 but down from 2007, when the economy was still humming. The MAC (and other arts companies) has taken a hit in another way — a 70 percent decline in funding from the Illinois Arts Council over the past five years. While this has led to some budget tightening, the dollars and cents are not the only consideration at non-profit facilities like the MAC. "We're mission driven. We aim to provide an eclectic array of choices," says MAC Director Stephen Cummins. "We don't have to sell out. It's great if we do. But we're not driven by the bottom line."

### WHEATON COLLEGE

Edman Chapel is the area's largest venue with 2,400 seats. "Patrons are moving away from a full season (seven performances) subscription to what we call a Flex (four performances) package and single events," says Dave Reifsnnyder, promotions manager for the arts program at the college, adding that "ticket sales are happening later, closer to the event itself."

Events typically are drawing from 1,500 to 2,000, says Reifsnnyder. A larger than usual crowd is expected on Jan. 22 to hear gifted violin prodigy Charlie Siem from London. The series recently presented the Bayanihan Dance Company from the Philippines in conjunction with events



The historic Rialto Square Theatre in Joliet draws crowds early in the season.

Photo courtesy of Rialto Square Theatre

"not to fight traffic for an hour and half into Chicago and pay \$30 for parking," says Rater. "People want value. In today's economy people are sensitive about spending dollars. We're affordable. We've got a majestic, beautiful, historic building. I've had so many people tell me, 'We're so glad you're here.'"

### RIALTO SQUARE THEATRE

Big productions with wide appeal fill the calendar of this historic Joliet mainstay, known for its exquisitely grand interior. On tap in the first three months of 2011 are *Sesame Street Live*, Lyle Lovett & John Hiatt, *Menopause The Musical*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Color Purple*, Herman's Hermits and *The Music of Abba*. In the works is programming inspired by popular reality TV shows.

celebrating Filipino-American History Month.

### ELGIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE ARTS CENTER

Elgin Community College's Visual and Performing Arts Center combines theatre, music and comedy performances. Its broad range of shows and performers is tied to its mission, says ECC Arts Center's Director of Performing Arts Steve Duchrow. "The arts are about transforming the human spirit, your spirit," he explains. "We believe artists should engage your passion and present context that is exceptional, relevant and meaningful."

Now half-way through its season, upcoming shows include musical acts Howard Levy and Chris Siebold, *Naturally 7*, and the Elgin Youth Symphony Orchestra; comedian Lewis Black; and a theatre production of *Guys and Dolls*.

### PARAMOUNT THEATRE

"Big plans," says Tim Rater, executive director of the Aurora theatre when asked how the Paramount is responding to the evolving local entertainment landscape. Though Rater won't go into detail — a formal announcement regarding the 2011-2012 season won't come until mid-March — he says the Paramount intends to double the number of performances in the coming year, including some large scale Broadway productions.

The Paramount draws patrons who prefer

### HEMMENS CULTURAL CENTER

The Hemmens, a 1,200-seat theatre, is the cornerstone of Elgin's arts community. Community involvement is the watchword for the arts in Elgin. This year the Hemmens will host a talent show for the five local high schools. Offered again will be the Elgin Summer Theatre and the Elgin Short Film Festival. Boosting the arts community is the forthcoming 55-unit artists' co-op downtown. Located in a renovated historic building, the lofts and apartments for artists is a \$14.5 million project, financed by the city, government grants and ArtSpace, based in Minneapolis.

### NORRIS CULTURAL ARTS CENTER

Jay Leno, Ramsey Lewis and the Joffrey Ballet have performed in the 1,000-seat theatre in St. Charles. Lately the sounds of the Civil War have reverberated here: the Norris is holding a multi-year series of events commemorating the 150th anniversary of the war. On April 16 Jay Ungar and Molly Mason Family Band, considered the nation's top performers of 19th-century American music, will play. Unger wrote the deeply evocative "Ashokan Farewell," used as theme music for Ken Burns' *Civil War* series. To reach a wider audience, the Norris is doing reciprocal advertising and website links with other local arts group and is planning an online advertising campaign.

## DRURY LANE

With its long history and strong base of season ticket holders, Drury Lane has been more insulated from the impact of the weaker economy than many theatres and arts groups. Known for putting a unique twist on classic musicals and comedies, Drury Lane productions have a broad appeal, and its proscenium-style stage offers a surprisingly intimate theatre experience considering the facility can accommodate almost 1,000 people.

The production values at Drury Lane are high, as evidenced by the fact that its recent production of *Ragtime* won seven Joseph Jefferson or "Jeff" Awards, which recognize excellence in theatre in the Chicago area. The upcoming season reflects Drury Lane's typical blend of well recognized shows. It kicks off in March with the Tony Award-winning Elton John and Tim Rice musical, *Aida*, followed by the Neil Simon comedy, *Broadway Bound*, in June. Other upcoming shows include *Sweeney Todd*, *The Sound of Music* and *Gypsy*.

## BUFFALO THEATRE ENSEMBLE

As one might expect from a group that derived its name from the edgy David Mamet play *American Buffalo*, the Buffalo Theatre Ensemble prides itself on creating thought-provoking productions. Through its mix of shows, the group — which is the resident theatre company at the McAninch Arts Center at College of DuPage — seeks to maintain a balance of both entertaining and "engaging" its audience, says Artistic Director Connie Canady Howard. But overall, "We are probably one of the theatres that pushes the envelope the most in the western suburbs," she acknowledges.

Upcoming shows include Bryony Lavery's *Frozen*, Noel Coward's *Private Lives* and Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*.

## FOX VALLEY REPERTORY (FORMERLY NOBLE FOOL THEATRICALS)

In residence at the Pheasant Run Resort, Fox Valley Repertory is taking advantage of

## Community Theatre Builds on its Grassroots Following

WHILE LARGER THEATRES bring in big-name shows and performers, community theatres across the western suburbs typically showcase local talent in all aspects — from acting and directing to writing and producing.

Among some of the more notable community theatre groups (not mentioned below in the main article) are Village Players and Circle Theatre, separate companies which currently share a facility in Oak Park; Wheaton Drama, and Grove Players of Downers Grove, two of the oldest community theatre groups, both dating back to the 1930s; and Village Theatre Guild in Glen Ellyn.

For a more complete listing of community theatre groups in the western suburbs, go to [wsl@westsuburbanliving.net](mailto:wsl@westsuburbanliving.net).

its presence within the Illinois Science and Technology Corridor. The company is teaming up with area scientists and technology whizzes to present *Collider 2011*, plays that tap into the insight and knowledge of playwrights and scientists. The Fox Valley Summer Arts Fest on weekends in July will premiere the Big Bang 10-Minute Play Fest.

"Being a part of St. Charles and the Fox Valley is a privilege," says Marketing Manager Audra Sybert. "A community with a healthy emphasis on the arts is a healthy community, one that is constantly moving forward and sharing stories that build bridges between generations."

Upcoming shows include the comedy *Leaving Iowa*, *Always* and *Around the World in 80 Days*.

## THEATRE OF WESTERN SPRINGS

"It's a fact in this economic climate people are thinking twice about paying for dinner, a show and parking," says Bill Hammack, managing director of the 82-year-old Theatre of Western Springs. "We're emphasizing value — near-professional quality performance, close to home, with a maximum ticket price of \$20 and ample free parking. Now, if we only had the budget to buy more media for that message."

That's not to say that the theatre doesn't already have a strong following — and at all age levels. Open nearly every night for rehearsals, classes, seminars or lectures, the theatre puts on more than 100 performances annually. About 300 active members keep the theatre going. The popular children's classes light creative sparks and help buttress the bottom line. Without that tuition revenue, "We'd be forced to raise our ticket prices to an unsustainable level," says Hammack.

## FIRST FOLIO THEATRE

Launched in 1997, First Folio is a professional not-for-profit theatre that utilizes the grounds of the DuPage Forest Preserve's Mayslake Peabody Estate in Oak Brook to add ambiance to its productions of Shakespeare's work and other classics. Upcoming shows include *Blithe Spirit*,  *fooling Buddha*, *Woman in Black* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

As a way of giving back to the community, the theatre offers educational shows and an artist-in-residence program.

## STEEL BEAM THEATRE

Founded in 2001 by actress and director Donna Steele, this St. Charles theatre company has rung up \$1.3 million in ticket sales over the years by offering a wide range of works. Upcoming main stage plays include *Don't Dress for Dinner*, *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *Later Life*.

The company plans to extend its reach into the community by developing internships for college students in production and administration and offering improvisation.

## OVERSHADOWED THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS

This Itasca company has built a sizeable audience. What it needs is a larger space than what it currently rents. "We've designed a new building. Our problem is financing. No one wants to loan a theatre company money in this economy," says Reba Hervas of the company.

Overshadowed focuses on plays based on the Bible or inspiring true stories. The arts serve a higher purpose, says Hervas. "It's a way for people with a variety of skills to work together for a common purpose." ■