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PORTRAIT OF NEW WEST LAWRENCE

GO WEST!

by Mary Doveton



THEATRE LAWRENCE'S REPUTATION MAKES IT AN ATTRACTIVE VENUE NOT ONLY FOR LOCAL AND NEARBY COMMUNITY MEMBERS, BUT ALSO FOR TALENT WHO COME IN FROM OTHER LOCATIONS TO PERFORM ON ITS STAGE.

When Theatre Lawrence felt the squeeze of too many people, productions and programming in its tiny space at 15th and New Hampshire streets, the lengthy search for a new home ultimately led the organization west to Bauer Farm. As the theater opened its new doors in June 2013, one of the early visitors welcomed the group exclaiming, "Thank you so much for bringing the theater to our neighborhood."

Located just off Sixth Street and Wakarusa Drive, Theatre Lawrence is easily accessible not only to its immediate neighbors but also to community patrons using adjacent major streets and highways. The large parking lot and close proximity to restaurants make it an attractive and stress-free evening out for community residents,

as well as visitors from out of town. A wide array of nearby restaurants presents patrons the opportunity to indulge in leisurely preshow dining, a fast snack or an after-show dessert.

The Theatre's own eclectic stage offerings range from Broadway-style musicals such as "Mamma Mia" to more contemporary dramas such as "The Girl On the Train." The shows are performed in a "thrust" space, meaning audiences sit on all three sides of the stage. The raised seating offers unimpeded views of the actors and scenery, with every seat the "best in the house." The Theatre's reputation for producing great shows and its high production values make it an attractive performance venue for both local talent and actors who choose to commute from other locations to perform on the Lawrence stage.

The Oldfather Lobby, a theater bar, carries a tempting variety of beverages

often themed to the show, as well as a signature alcoholic milkshake. A large collection of masks from around the world, gifted to the theater by George and Eleanor Woodyard, as well as an ever-changing exhibit of art from members of the Lawrence Art Guild, give audiences interesting pieces to view and discuss with their friends. In the coming season, Theatre Lawrence will join in the Lawrence Final Fridays tradition by opening art receptions featuring local artists.

The recent addition of an outdoor stage has expanded summer theater opportunities, and newly added free summer movies bring people together for hot popcorn, cold drinks and family fun. A bicycle rack by Kate Dinneen, Lawrence blacksmith, with a theater theme often boasts an assortment of neighborhood bikes ranging from those with training wheels to brand-new electric models.



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Theatre of Lawrence stage productions for *Mama Mia* and *Camelot* (below)

Child's Play

Children claim a special place at Theatre Lawrence. During the school year, a series of one- and two-day workshops called "School's Out, Theatre's In" engages imaginations and fosters creativity on days when school is not in session yet most parents still need to work. For youth more severely bitten by the theater bug or who want more immersive material, there are after-school plays that culminate in public performances, as well as extended summer camp opportunities.

One of the most exciting projects for Theatre Lawrence is the theater's participation as a national chapter in The Penguin Project. This program pairs special needs youth between

the ages of 10 and 21 with normally developing peer mentors of a similar age. During a four-month rehearsal period, the young people act, sing, dance and, most importantly, get to know each other before presenting a fully staged musical featuring the special needs youth in the leading roles. The friendships and affiliations forged between the young people, their parents, their friends and their neighbors reverberate through the community. Interactions continue at churches, schools and stores. Now in its fourth year of production, these musicals sell out to enthusiastic fans and are often accompanied by at least a few tears of joy and pride.

Another source of pride for the Theatre is its ability to share its facility

with the community. A regular polling place, church rental location and vaccine clinic, the Theatre has also opened its doors to a host of community activities on the rare days without scheduled rehearsals, classes and performances. Myriad activities from weddings, funerals, baby showers, political meetings, operas and dance recitals have found their way onstage.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the generous support of the community, the love, determination and hard work of the small professional theater staff and the hundreds of volunteers who make up the Theatre Lawrence family. All have happily relocated to their home in West Lawrence.



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