



Arts & Culture Finalist: Old Town Playhouse

Initiative: Enhancing the Patron's Sensory Experience at OTP

OVERVIEW OF THE INITIATIVE

Old Town Playhouse wants to continue transforming their MainStage theatre at the corner of Eighth and Cass into a venue, audiences will remember and return to regularly with pleasure. Antiquated speakers will be replaced with a custom designed sound system to ensure a balance of sound throughout the theatre. Energy efficient LED stage instruments will be installed to bring a wider variety of lighting options to the stage. The HVAC system will be altered to greatly increase the comfort of the audience. Projected scenery will strengthen OTP's ability to bring more complex shows to the stage. The enjoyment of patrons with hearing deficits will be enhanced by a new digital assisted listening system. These will be crowning touches on a transformation that began in 2013.

The following sections contain key information from the application, as written by the applicant. Please note that while detailed financial information has not been provided here, each applicant submitted an initiative budget and supporting financial documents as part of their application. Each proposed initiative and the supporting financial documentation has undergone a thorough financial review by our Community Investment Review Committee and the initiatives proposed by our finalists have been found to be fiscally sound.

FULL EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Old Town Playhouse, one of the largest community theatres in Michigan, is truly an out of the ordinary amateur theatre. We are fortunate to be able to continually change lives of youth and adults. Our theatre's goal is to create impact every time we mount a show. We regard it as our job to alter lives with each performance. To remain successful, we need to

make improvements that renew the shine or capture attention in a new way. In our 60th year of creating impact it is time to further improve our patron experience.

We don't require \$100,000 grants to develop programs or bring in performers. We do need funding of that scope to modernize the way we present live theatre to our regional community, to improve the audience experience in ways that capture and expand their enthusiasm and excitement.

In 2020, OTP wants to continue transforming our MainStage theatre at the corner of Eighth and Cass into a venue, audiences will remember and return to regularly with pleasure. Antiquated speakers will be replaced with a custom designed sound system to ensure a balance of sound throughout the theatre. Energy efficient LED stage instruments will be installed to bring a wider variety of lighting options to the stage. Our HVAC system will be altered to greatly increase the comfort of the audience. Projected scenery will strengthen our ability to bring more complex shows to the stage. The enjoyment of patrons with hearing deficits will be enhanced by a new digital assisted listening system. These will be crowning touches on a transformation that began in 2013. Our staff; volunteers; and local contractors, whenever possible, will complete this work in a narrow window of time between shows in the 2020-2021 season. This requires careful planning which began in January.

We learned over the past seven years that our community loves what we do more than where we do it. They are willing to accept an adapted building if we present quality work and make improvements that keep their experience fresh and enjoyable. At one time, we considered demolishing the structure and building anew, but we realized we can achieve what we really need by continuing to improve the space we have.

In the future, you may see even more renovations and expansion that maximize the use of our footprint at Old Town Playhouse. Those plans are being considered, but before we ask the community to support what will be a large capital campaign, we want to ensure their needs are being met and exceeded when they attend a show, a concert, a workshop, a film, or a lecture at OTP right now. Our work to engage and impact our audience is ongoing. If we can make these transformational changes to our mainstage theatre to improve the technical side of what we do while improving the patron's comfort, and accomplish that without engaging in a public capital campaign, we believe they will be better prepared to support the changes yet to come.

COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED

Old Town Playhouse's primary service area is Antrim (23,292), Benzie (17,573), Grand Traverse (91,807), Kalkaska (17,634), and Leelanau (21,657) counties located in the northwest area of the lower peninsula of Michigan (population data is from US Census estimates in 2010). The area from which we draw audience and students on a regular and substantial basis, however, now includes Charlevoix, Crawford, Emmet, Manistee, Otsego, and Wexford Counties as well. Antrim, Crawford, Kalkaska, Manistee, Otsego, and Wexford counties are identified as culturally underserved.

Gender demographics are anecdotal but appear to skew slightly higher than the national average of 51% female. Our audience is more often 60 or 65 percent women. The majority of volunteers are also women ranging in age from 16 to 90 plus.

OTP is perpetuating an interest and passion for live theatre in our region. Defunding of drama and art programs in our schools leaves young people with limited opportunities to pursue artistic passions that change and improve lives. The OTP Young Company nurtures youth with an interest to participate by encouraging onstage and backstage instruction. We strongly feel young people exposed to and involved in the arts create a healthier cultural community.

Auditorium improvements made in 2015, made our MainStage theatre more ADA accessible. Aisles were widened, four wheelchair and companion seats were added, our exterior handicap ramp was widened, and an automatic door opener was installed. All but one room on our first two floors is handicap accessible. A third floor, where we have our costume construction, primary dressing rooms, and prop storage, is still a challenge as we are not able to access it by elevator. We are exploring options to address this, but until then we provide accessible space on the second floor when necessary.

The artistic environment in the Grand Traverse region is one of its finest features. We are home to the Traverse Symphony Orchestra, City Opera House, Interlochen Center for the Performing Arts, Parallel 45 Theatre, a satellite location for the Crooked Tree Arts Center, the Traverse City Film Festival, the Dennon Museum, numerous galleries, and a number of places to go and listen to music. The performing arts, choir, and band programs in our schools receive some of the highest honors across the state, and we are pleased to say many of the youth in these programs are part of our Young Company program.

We know Old Town Playhouse is one of the organizations contributing to why people looking for an area rich with cultural stimulation choose Northwest Michigan. We are regularly told how much they enjoy being able to see high quality, live theatre in their home area for a reasonable price. They comment on the variety of choices ranging from traditional, well-loved musicals on our MainStage to cutting edge dramas in our Studio, and new works like the winner of the 2016 Community Theatre Association of Michigan playwriting competition presented in 2018 in our Studio Theatre.

NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED

Beginning March of 2020, residents of the US became acutely aware how important the arts are to their well-being. They turned to music for comfort, took virtual tours of museums to pass the time, re-created works of art in their own homes dressing in comforters and lampshades, choreographed dance routines to keep themselves active, and watched movies and live stage performances online. OTP already knew of that importance. We consider keeping our community healthy, better informed, and yes, entertained of primary importance to our mission.

We know we fulfill a variety of our community's needs:

To create - Plays and musicals fulfill the needs of visual artists by providing canvasses in the guise of stage scenery or props or costumes. Musicians find an outlet by playing an instrument or performing vocally. Dancers choreograph and perform. Actors transform into another person in another era to satisfy their need to create, and in doing so, often bring literature alive. Live theatre is unique because it combines all the arts to form yet another art form.

To remain connected and vital - Beyond stagecraft, the Playhouse fulfills the need of those who want to build, sew, use engineering skills, find a purpose volunteering, or learn a new skill. They remain active while contributing to their community and making new friends.

To learn – Through our classes and camps for youth, our workshops for adults, and our talkbacks following thought provoking shows, we fulfill our mission of education in the arts. We strive to offer an opportunity for people to consider thinking in a broader, cultural mindset.

To be entertained – Every month, you can find something entertaining at the Playhouse or the Studio location. Our invited dress rehearsals for special needs adults open the creative door for underserved populations.

To be financially secure – With a yearly budget just under one million dollars, OTP is a significant economic driver in the region. Conservatively, 85% of that budget is spent locally in payroll, artist stipends, the purchase of supplies and materials, rent, utilities, insurance, and advertising. In addition, the Americans for the Arts released a report documenting the economic impact audience members provide when they attend performances. An average of \$31.47 is spent by each person in addition to the ticket price. With an average yearly audience of 21,500, that results in \$676,000 spent on food, drinks, gas, babysitters, and sometimes accommodation. Add the money spent by our volunteers for the same services and OTP contributes at least \$1.5 million annually to our region's economy.

To be inclusive - OTP provides a place that is open and inclusive of everyone. Arts for All Escapes, a school-based program, brings a group of disabled youth to the Playhouse each year to experience what it is like to be onstage. In 2017 OTP began offering sensory friendly performances, outside of its regular schedule of shows, for families and adults who live with autism. The LGBTQ community holds gatherings at the Playhouse and is appreciative of programming that provides inclusive entertainment.

GAPS IN SERVICES

Community theatre, by its nature, fills a creative gap, allowing members of the community to fulfill their need to creatively express themselves as an avocation rather than a vocation. People who choose not to or are unable to pursue a career in the arts, find community theatre an outlet for them to express themselves and provide a service to the community in the process. While many of us think that presenting a show is about us, the performers and the crew, it is far more about filling the audience's need for entertainment, enlightenment, and perhaps emotional outlet at a reasonable price, close to their home. A gap is created when the community thinks of community theatre as substandard entertainment or conversely that live theatre, in general, is elitist.

In the 2010 census people were asked if they attended arts and cultural events that included concerts, live theatre, opera, etc. The result was a decline of several percentage points from the previous census. For the first time, however, the census asked if people identified themselves as creative and the answer to that question resulted in a much higher

percentage of people than those who attended events. It is the gap between those numbers on which arts leaders are focusing in order to build their future and change the opinion of community theatre.

Arts Midwest conducted a study based on these findings and concluded the following. A segment of the population feels distanced by the words “arts and culture” because they associate those words with privilege or wealth. This is important because the people currently interested in creative endeavors are younger people, women, parents of children under 18, and people of color. In general, many of these people do not fit into the categories of privilege or wealth. We must work to adapt our descriptive language to include the words “creative expression” and be cognizant of finding ways to actively reach the people who are in the gap.

For many, the gap is widened by their obsession with and love of technology. Theatre presented as it has been for centuries, is not active enough, does not involve them fully, and may leave them feeling disconnected. Involving them without alienating the current audience is paramount. Whether that involvement is as an audience member or as a participating volunteer, we need to keep looking for technological advances to augment our productions.

This is particularly important at OTP where our building lacks backstage and wing space and has a very limited fly space where we can quickly raise and lower scenery to change scenes. New shows that appeal to younger audiences and families are staged using the technology of projections, special lighting, and multiple scene changes that take place as the action onstage continues. To stage those shows successfully we must find a way to participate as a 21st Century theatre.

We also see a gap in theatre available for people on the autism spectrum, and we are beginning to find ways to fill it.

GOALS, OBJECTIVES, OUTCOMES & INDICATORS

At OTP we change lives every day. We see it in the increased confidence in our youth after completing a camp, in the testimonials of our adult volunteers who tell us we literally saved their life, and through the smiles and laughter of lonely seniors who find new friends. All these people will tell you they found a second, loving family at OTP. We strive to change the lives of our audience as well, with thought provoking shows, plays that delight the entire family, and musicals that provide a happy escape for an hour or two. Long after the

curtain comes down, the happiness lingers, and minds continue to contemplate new ideas. We can make those experiences more life changing with an Impact 100 grant.

Imagine you are sitting in the Old Town Playhouse with your family about to see a live production of the musical version of Cinderella. Your children are excited to see a storybook brought to life. They are sitting in comfortable seats or perhaps in their booster seat provided by the theatre. Everyone has their snack and beverage. Perhaps there is even someone dressed as a princess in the group. The lights fade, the conductor takes her place in the orchestra loft, and the overture begins. The sound is crystal clear and balanced. It is loud enough for grandma and grandpa, but not so loud as to upset the youngest in the group. The lights come up and you are all transported to a world of make believe comprised of painted scenery and backlit projections. You variously see a castle, a village, and the interior of a cottage. When the actors take the stage their beautiful, brightly colored costumes are illuminated in theatre lights that bathe them in a variety of colors and intensity that change without effort. The actors open their mouths and you can hear every word they speak or sing, there is no ambient sound to disturb your enjoyment, and the voices are balanced with the orchestra wherever you are in the audience. At intermission you realize you have not been too cold or warm and no uncomfortable air was blowing on you. The children are still engaged in the show and grandpa is delighted to hear every word through his hearing aids. After the show, you greet the actors and take pictures with Cinderella and the Fairy Godmother; and when you leave, your family is excitedly chattering about the experience, how magical it was for all ages, and how much you look forward to returning to Old Town Playhouse.

That scenario is the goal we are poised to achieve with the help of an Impact 100 grant. As one of the five largest community theatres in the state, our audience expects to see a quality theatre production. To hold the attention of our current audience and expand our reach to include new patrons, we must find ways to continue to innovate and improve our productions. We are already an out of the ordinary community theatre, but we need to continually reach higher to remain current and continue to make an impact.

Recent background is necessary for you to fully understand how we continually work to create impact. In 2011 the Playhouse conducted a feasibility study to determine if the region would support the construction of a new, enlarged facility and/or improve and expand the current building. The study overwhelmingly supported the idea of a \$10 million capital campaign; thought the building at the corner of Eighth and Cass should be leveled;

believed the new facility should be built at the same location; and felt strongly the campaign should be put off at least five years. Many thought the Playhouse should demonstrate the ability to maintain and improve the current facility before they would entrust us with funding for a new project. We listened and made repairs that would make the Playhouse a more pleasant place for what was regarded as the “short term”. Without this study, we might not have aggressively undertaken the renovations that began the transformation of our theatre. The outcome was so successful that patrons and volunteers believed we could remain in the current building and continue to improve and expand it to possibly bring the Studio Theatre home again. Today the Playhouse is regarded as a gem, a shining example of how preserving and improving the old could lead to building the future.

Our objectives for improving the patron experience for the “long term” follow.

As part of the improvements in 2014, a sound board with more channels and digital capability was installed along with wiring for future improvements, but speakers were not replaced. They continued to deteriorate, and replacement is now urgent if we want to continue to have quality sound for all productions. A professional sound company was contracted to develop a plan for the optimal placement of speakers for balanced sound throughout the theatre. This upgrade will also include a hearing aid compatible listening loop for the main floor, which is regularly used in theatres, that can also be used with non-compatible hearing aids as well.

Just prior to the major renovations, the air handler for the auditorium failed and had to be replaced. The new unit was a definite improvement. It was more efficient than the equipment it replaced, and that brought cost savings and streamlined heating and cooling. Unfortunately, it also created audience annoyance. The temperature in the theatre quickly warms up when stage lights are on and it is filled with an audience. The AC then turns on abruptly causing noise and a blast of cold air on sections of the audience. Patrons rapidly transition from overly warm to cold, which is not pleasant. We can have vents installed that spread the airflow better and put pressure releasing points in the duct work, which will eliminate the loud noise.

Recently the Playhouse replaced all incandescent and fluorescent lights inside and outside the building with LED bulbs, and the cost savings are already evident with an eight percent decrease in electric bills. This did not include the stage lighting instruments as, until recently, they were not effective for overall lighting. While expensive, the new instruments

can now accommodate all our stage lighting needs and will immediately return a cost savings as well as an overall environmental benefit as LED instruments consume less energy and last much longer.

The final objective of our enhancements creates the most visual impact. The presentation of live theatre changed with the introduction of and continued improvements in digital scenery. We can enhance existing, high-quality sets built by our volunteers. We can transport you from a fairy tale street scene, to the magical transformation of four white mice to four white horses, to a beautiful ballroom in seconds. The goal is to shorten scene changes and keep patrons engaged in the story taking place before them. The effective use of multiple screens to make this happen is dependent on the integration of several pieces of equipment called Image Cues. These are programmable devices that bring up images or video with the touch of a button and allows them to be faded or cross faded from image to image. OTP currently has one ImageCue, but during the recent run of Silent Sky, using multiple display screens, we discovered it was less than satisfactory to try to use one device to run images simultaneously on four screens. The addition of three ImageCues will solve the problem. It is an exciting addition to live theatre that greatly enriches the audience experience in this age of video technology and allows OTP to stage a greater range of shows that were previously limited by a lack of backstage and wing storage and fly space.

Outcomes will first be measured by our ushers, who are our eyes and ears as they see the face and hear the comments of audience members leaving the theatre. Our House Managers will document those comments. We will continue to maintain records on attendance and participation in programs to watch for growth. We will survey patrons to gain a deeper understanding of their experience. Kids squealing and skipping are a good outcome; and by contrast the tears of an adult, whether of joy or sadness, are equally important.

Indicators of success will be an initial 20% increase in audience and class attendees, followed by a 10% increase each year for the next five years. The utility bills will be compared for energy savings which we believe will come down by another 10-20% as stage instruments draw a great deal of power. A lessening of complaints about being chilled by cold air blowing directly on a patron or the inability to hear or the orchestra being too loud will be all be welcome indicators. But the best indicators will be smiling faces; entranced children; songs being hummed on the way out; and even that glistening tear will be a seen as an indicator of success.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

OTP has a highly qualified staff that for the most part has been in place for at least five years. Primary to the success of the proposed improvements will be Gary Bolton who serves as Facilities Manager and Production Resource Manager. Bolton is a longtime volunteer who became an employee in 2012. His knowledge of the building and what it needs to run successfully, alerted us to the need for the proposed changes. He spent several months researching solutions and sharing them with other staff and the volunteer chairs of our technical departments. Bolton manages the technical aspects of all shows as the Production Resource Manager and works hand in hand with the volunteers involved with each production. He is also our primary sound designer and operator. He works tirelessly to make sure volunteers have the materials necessary to do their jobs effectively and safely. Gary will serve as the contact person for all work being completed and will keep contractors on time and on budget. As a testament to his abilities, Bolton kept the previous capital campaign totaling \$610,000 to less than 10% over budget, and most of that overage was due to hidden problems encountered when the floor of our 100 year old building was opened for the auditorium construction. Another important aspect to Bolton's job will be to keep work progressing while avoiding disturbance of the regular theatre season which will begin as early as August. This was something else Bolton managed extremely well in the previous campaign, and he will work closely with contractors, staff, and show directors to reduce frustration and delay.

Bolton will be supported by Executive Director Deb Jackson. She is a previous Board of Trustees member who assumed the job of Interim ED when the Board determined that the existing job of Executive Director needed to be reorganized. Previously, Philip Murphy, who had been the ED for 14 years, managed all day to day operations of the nearly one-million-dollar organization as well as oversaw the artistic direction of OTP and created most of the marketing materials. When the Development Director moved on, it was determined that the Playhouse could be better managed by assigning Murphy to manage the artistic direction and vision and hiring a new Executive Director to oversee operations and many of the development duties. Jackson was well suited to take on the job in an interim role, and since has become so valuable that the interim has been dropped from her title. Deb will meet with Gary regularly to make sure our project is on time and that no unforeseen problems popped up. She will also keep donors and constituents aware of the progress. Key volunteers from lighting, sound and stage construction will also assist Bolton on the project.

Colleen Hill Rakunas, the Office Manager, will post invoices and pay bills on a timely basis. Peg Brace, a retired accountant, OTP Trustee and volunteer Business Manager will document the finances for reporting back to Impact 100.