

Thirty theatrical years

By Tammy Dohner
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CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. — Thirty years ago, John McDonald and Tom Thayer opened the doors of the silenced theater at the corner of Franklin and First Streets. The former movie house had been shuttered for three years, but “John-and-Tom,” as they are known around town, had a vision for live theater in Clarksville.

“The vision,” according to Thayer, “is on track. Our goal was to create an environment, to bring in actors, professionals, to mingle. A place where we are not afraid to create all types of theater — for the actors, for the shows, for the audience.”

As a trained actor working in New York

City, McDonald shared the stage with James Earl Jones in Shakespeare’s “MacBeth” and with Ralph Waite in “A Lion in Winter.” He has written and produced plays and taught acting for decades. Thayer’s time in New York was spent creating and teaching programs in dance and drama and performing in off-Broadway productions.

Maturing in Clarksville

Fortunately for Clarksville, Thayer and McDonald chose to take the experience earned in America’s theater capital and set theatrical roots in the heart of Thayer’s hometown. As with many endeavors, over

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John McDonald, left, artistic director, and Tom Thayer, executive director, opened the doors to The Roxy Regional Theatre on November 3, 1983. THE

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the years The Roxy has faced tight budgets, coupled with the challenges and limitations of operating in a historic building.

When asked if he would still do it, knowing 30 years ago what he knows now, Thayer said, “Yes! When I was a kid growing up in Clarksville I did theater — everything. I would not turn back. I would do it the same way I did it.”

McDonald, on the other hand, says, “I would change everything from the get-go. I would do it a lot differently. I was misguided, and too assertive, coming from New York. As a Southerner, I now see to do things more slowly. I was brusque, more rude, from living in Yankee-land for 18 years.”

As for the shows, McDonald says, “I would never open the season with a serious play.”

He says it took three years before they thought to do a Christmas-themed show during the Christmas season, and around 25 years to realize they needed a Halloween-themed show in the fall. When The Roxy staged a Dracula play, which was an assemblage of book and movie, McDonald

says, “The audience came in droves. It was very big in Clarksville.”

As the Roxy has matured, so has the audience.

“Clarksville has evolved from being cautious and really only going to ‘safe’ shows. Now it’s okay to do more cutting edge theater,” Thayer says. “In the past it was a lighthearted musical group, but now there are also audiences for the plays, the musicals, the cutting edge stuff, and some who come to all of it.”

Thayer says the season schedule has evolved into a formula that opens in fall with a big-name musical, a Halloween show, American literature, a Christmas theme, “Vagina Monologues” (for 11 years running), something for children in K-3, a light musical for Valentine’s Day, Shakespeare in March, and for the past three years a Civil War story in recognition of the sesquicentennial, then the summer season.

Creating magic

The schedule regularly includes productions tied to the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System’s curriculum with productions of American literature and Shakespeare, which has also been a learning opportu-



John McDonald, left, artistic director, and Tom Thayer, executive director, have been the backbone of a Clarksville cultural icon since 1983. THE LEAF-CHRONICLE/GREG WILLIAMSON

nity for The Roxy. McDonald says, “For years we tried to pretend we were the Old Vic with the costumes.” After seeing an Orson Welles production done all in black, he realized, “Why get it all bollixed up in clothing, which can create distance from the audience, when it’s the words? Originally, Shakespeare was performed in modern dress, and the actors didn’t try to be Romans or Bohemians.”

“So many theaters closing in this economic environment were dependent on making magic and spending a lot of money to do it,” McDonald says. “We create magic and don’t spend a lot, by recycling sets and costumes.”

While the sets are

sometimes basic or restyled from previous productions, the supporting technology is high-tech.

“The online ticketing system had to happen,” Thayer says. “We had years of people making reservations and not showing up. And it’s called show business — there’s a business side to it. It’s been a life saver.”

In addition to the website and online pre-paid ticketing, Thayer says Roxy Technical Director Adam Kurtz “has stayed on the cutting edge inside the theater” with sound, light and video.

Since 1995, the Roxy’s Regional School for the Arts and the summer program in partnership with Clarksville Parks and Recreation Department

have built confidence and ignited the ambitions of thousands of young actors.

“We average about 100 students each year in the two programs,” McDonald says. “I am so proud of the fact so many young people have had the experience of working with us and have moved up and on.”

McDonald says the true value in the programs is that they “make young people feel comfortable. They learn to think on their feet. They learn improvisation skills, posture, and to be able to carry a tune. The theater is nice; it’s just an extra bonus they get with it.”

Many former Roxy students are now profes-

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sional performers.

While The Roxy’s building, a 1947 movie theater, is an architecturally interesting landmark, it presents limitations and challenges when it comes to staging performances. McDonald recalls that Roxy supporter and actress Mary Harpel once commented to him that they “spend more time hiding stuff than building things” due to the absence of wings in the stage area.

Looking forward to a new building to house future Roxy Center of Arts and Education, McDonald says, “I wish it could have happened 30 years ago, but it takes 30 years to build a body of work, to be worthy and worthwhile before efforts can be valued, to be seen as possibility.”

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