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INSIDE DES MOINES PERFORMING ARTS  
2017





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On the Cover: The bright and colorful new Cowles Commons complements the west face of the Civic Center. The sweeping piazza is a showplace in its own right, and a gathering spot for families and friends.



# WELCOME

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*Des Moines Performing Arts stands as a monument to our community's generous commitment to the arts.*

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For 38 years Des Moines Performing Arts has been leaving its mark on the cultural fabric of our community. In the last two decades we have changed our organization's name, added a performance venue, greatly expanded our programming and significantly contributed to the quality of life throughout Iowa.

This kind of impact does not just happen; it is because of the unwavering generosity of donors like you that we have been able to bring world-class productions to our stages. Your loyalty ensures that school children can enjoy curriculum-based performances that bring their studies to life. Your backing ensures engagements, like our Dance Series performances, reach young people just beginning to explore their own talents. Your commitment guarantees that generations of Iowans will continue to feel the connection that only a live performance can create.



In this new publication you will get a peek inside Des Moines Performing Arts, an organization you have helped to shape. Here we will tell the stories of those affected by your gifts. You will learn about the traditions you support and the lives you have touched. This publication is about you and the many ways your support influences performing arts in our community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff Chelesvig".

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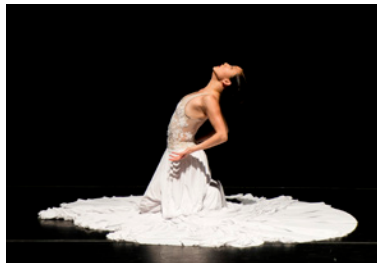


## CENTER STAGE: EDUCATION

Engaging Youth a High Priority at Des Moines Performing Arts









## 06 ENGAGEMENT

**T**he first show for young audiences Jeff Chelesvig saw at the Civic Center was PIPPI LONGSTOCKING, and the theater's new president and CEO was not impressed.

"When I came here in 1995, not much was offered for children's programming, although a national promoter did rent the theater and brought in occasional kid shows," Chelesvig says. "The place was packed for those shows, but the quality wasn't very good. The entire PIPPI LONGSTOCKING production probably arrived in a station wagon."

Chelesvig soon became clear on one goal: His organization was a mission-based not-for-profit, and he would make education—particularly for young people—a priority.

Two decades later, Des Moines Performing Art's education programs utilize multiple venues to capacity, annually engaging more than 75,000 Iowans. The significance of the initiative led to a major rebranding of Des Moines Performing Arts in 2013.

"In its early days, the community saw us as a building—the Civic Center—then it saw us as a presenter that did a Broadway series, and we did both those things very well," says Eric Olmscheid, director of programming and education. "In the last

decade, there's been a major interest in redefining DMPA as a community-based organization that has a lot more going on than just those two efforts."


Throughout the year, DMPA presents world-class performances in addition to workshops for teachers and educational programming for students from across the state, who watch curriculum-based productions for \$1 per ticket.

"We're helping prepare new supporters of the arts for future generations," Olmscheid says. "Our education programs don't generate revenue; in fact, they depend largely on donations for funding. But they are crucial to building arts infrastructure in our community."

### ASSISTING TEACHERS

Dawn Lewis, a fifth-grade teacher at Cattell Elementary School in Des Moines, is passionate about DMPA's Professional Development for Educators. It's clear to her that by showing educators how to integrate the arts with instruction in core subject areas, they can infuse new life into traditional subjects.

"Integrating the arts allows me to bring joy and enthusiasm into my teaching," Lewis says. "I see such a difference in my students and the enthusiasm they have when they know we are going to have arts integration in our lesson."

A group of children are performing on a stage. They are wearing costumes that include orange shirts, blue shirts, and black pants with suspenders. Some children have blue face paint on their cheeks. One child in the background is holding up a black shirt with the number '1702' on it. The children are smiling and some have their arms raised.

Children enjoying  
Performance Camp:  
*The Wizard of Oz.*

**“INTEGRATING  
THE ARTS  
ALLOWS ME  
TO BRING  
JOY AND  
ENTHUSIASM  
INTO MY  
TEACHING.”**

Dawn Lewis  
Cattell Elementary School, Des Moines

## 08 ENGAGEMENT

As a result of this program, teachers like Lewis have the opportunity learn from national experts through our partnership with the Kennedy Center.

### AWARDS PROGRAM

When Kyle Woollums became drama director at George Washington High School in Cedar Rapids, he made it a priority to take advantage of DMPA's Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards program.

The IHSMTA program presents learning opportunities for students and teachers, as well as adjudication of schools' musical productions by theater professionals and educators. "Our adjudicators are all either professionals in theater or former theater educators," says Karoline Myers, DMPA's education manager. "They're all people who have a wealth of background."

The highlight of the year for more than 500 IHSMTA participants is the Awards Showcase on the Civic Center stage. Based on adjudicator recommendations, schools are invited to perform excerpts from their musical productions. Students also work with a professional choreographer and music director from New York.

"We made the commitment that we were going to bring in a choreographer from New York with Broadway experience, a music director from Broadway, a lighting designer from Santa Barbara, and seasoned professionals to help guide our year-end Awards Showcase," Chelesvig says. "Of course, that means the cost goes up; and this program's success depends upon the support of our donors."

From Woollums' point of view, "that ceremony is the kind of recognition that musical theater deserves."

Each year, one male and one female student are named winners of the Triple Threat Award, meaning they excel at singing, dancing and acting. Winners travel to New York for a 10-day intensive course with students from around the country. It includes private coaching, master classes and rehearsals with professionals and concludes with a showcase on a Broadway stage.

The IHSMTA program offers other opportunities, Woollums adds. His students were able to attend a concert with Jason Robert Brown in Des Moines for \$10 a ticket, as well as participate in a workshop and master class with Tony Award-winning actor Sutton Foster.

### APPLAUSE SERIES

DMPA's Applause Series brings world-class performing artists and diverse art forms to its stages for school audiences. Each performance connects to in-class curriculum, and correlating study guide materials are available to attending schools.

"We don't give trombone lessons; we don't teach choral music," Chelesvig says. "What we do is provide a curriculum-based performance for kids in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. And it's a very successful program."

More than 57,000 students from 40 Iowa counties participated in the Applause Series last year. "For many students, this is the first time they've experienced a live performance," Olmscheid says. Myers often has to explain to children that the show is not going to be on a screen, she says. "We talk in the lobby before they get started and tell them there are actually going to be real people on stage, creating something for them." ■



Emotions run high at the 2016 Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards Showcase as Demarius Fisher is named a Triple Threat Award winner.

## BACKSTAGE

### FROM CAVE DRAWINGS TO CRITICAL THINKING

**Karoline Myers** describes her job—she's education manager at Des Moines Performing Arts—as “feeding the souls of young people.” But it's also about preparing them for success.

“Seventy-two percent of business leaders say that creativity is the No. 1 skill they are seeking when hiring,” says Myers, a Conrad native who came to DMPA in 2010. “Participating in the arts teaches kids to communicate, to think critically and to collaborate with others.”

The director of programming and education, **Eric Olmscheid**, agrees: “The arts help us understand ourselves as human beings,” Olmscheid says. “If you look at how we've ever documented our existence, it's all through an art form. ...Today, we're not doing cave drawings and indigenous dancing, but it's still part of the fabric of us as human beings.”



## 10 ENGAGEMENT

THE SHOW MADE ME FEEL SOMETIMES HAPPY,  
SOMETIMES SAD, AND SOMETIMES EVEN AMUSED.  
THANK YOU FOR A WONDERFUL PROGRAM!

DEAR *CAT IN THE HAT*  
PERFORMERS, I FELT  
REALLY HAPPY WHEN  
I WATCHED YOUR  
SHOW BECAUSE IT  
WAS REALLY FUNNY  
AND IT TOLD ME TO  
ACT LIKE MYSELF.

MY  
FAVORITE  
PART WAS  
EVERYTHING.

DEAR FRIEND, THANK YOU FOR  
PAYING AND FOR LETTING US GO.

**I WOULD LOVE TO COME THERE AGAIN.**

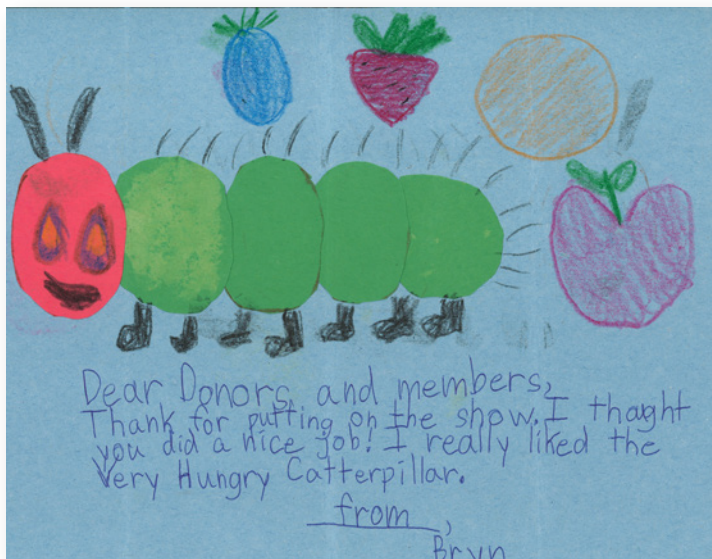
**GREAT JOB!**

THANK YOU  
NOTES FROM  
2ND GRADE  
ELEMENTARY  
STUDENTS

**THANK YOU FOR  
HELPING OUR CLASS GO  
TO THE CIVIC CENTER.  
MY FAVORITE PART WAS  
ALL OF IT.**

DEAR DES MOINES PERFORMING ARTS  
DONORS, THANK YOU FOR LETTING US  
SEE YOUR AWESOME PLAY.

WHILE WATCHING THE SHOW I FELT CALM.



Dear Donors and members,  
Thank for putting on the show. I thought  
you did a nice job! I really liked the  
Very Hungry Catterpillar.  
from  
Brun





Eager youngsters line up for an Applause Series production in the Civic Center.





## COMMITMENT COUNTS DONORS MAKE DMPA'S WORK POSSIBLE. THEY'RE VITAL TO THE MISSION

**D**onors are the quiet life force driving Des Moines Performing Arts. 5,000 generous individuals fund over \$3 million of DMPA programs. Donors consistently share that supporting arts education is at the core of why they give.

“Without loyal donor support, we would only be able to conduct a fraction of the programs that bring performing arts into the lives of so many,” says Director of Development Cherian Koshy. “I see our



## 14 DONOR

team's work as a way to connect people who are passionate about the arts with opportunities that meaningfully shape the performing arts landscape in our community."

Fostering connections is at the core of a new culture of philanthropy Koshy and his Development colleagues are working to create at Des Moines Performing Arts. For years DMPA utilized a membership model where people could purchase a membership that came with specific benefits. This transactional model went away, but people still refer to themselves as members.

"We hope that by better telling the narrative of those individuals impacted by DMPA, we can engage more of our donors in lifelong, meaningful relationships," says Koshy. "What we want to focus on now is communicating how we steward the funds that we receive from donors and explaining the joy these dollars bring to so many in our community. Many of our donors 'get it,' but we can help connect the dots."

Development Manager Anna Cramer says it's important for donors to understand that DMPA offers more than performances on stage. "Our education programming has an incredible reach," she says. "We want to emphasize this aspect of our mission and show donors how they are enriching and changing lives."

As the Development team focuses on this budding culture of philanthropy, donors can expect to interact with DMPA in many new and exciting ways. "This publication is just one of the many ways we are exploring to connect with our donors," says Koshy. "We want every interaction from purchasing a ticket, to attending a performance, from walking across Cowles Commons to seeing children play pretend in their neighborhood to remind our donors of the significant influence their gift makes."

This is your DMPA and we look forward to building what's next with you. ■

DMPA Development  
professionals Cherian Koshy,  
L. Carlson, Bill Hitt and  
Anna Cramer.





# OUR DONORS ARE...

## GENEROUS:

Most donors make giving to the arts one of their highest priorities each year, recognizing the ongoing costs of bringing high quality and accessible performances to our community. In total, this large family of donors raises nearly \$3 million, which is needed to keep arts programming available and accessible.

## COMMITTED:

Donors buy tickets to some performances and may be subscribers. They know that their gifts are making a serious difference. Thousands of self-sacrificing benefactors stand behind the continued success of all of our programming regardless of whether they are coming to the Civic Center for a show.

## SMART:

Donors know that they are investing in one of the most scientifically proven facts: Arts education changes lives. Test scores, grade point averages and graduation rates rise for students who are involved in the performing arts. Nationally, fewer than 4 percent of elementary schools teach theater.

## DIVERSE:

Of the more than 5,000 donors who support the cause of arts and arts education, many come from outside of Des Moines. Donors live in nearly every city and county in Iowa.

## HEROES:

Great and ever-improving performing arts is no accident. It depends on you. You stepped in to save kids from going through elementary school without a live performance. You rescued our community from missing out on life-changing performances. You are their heroes!

## 16\_DONOR SPOTLIGHT

“THE FACT THAT  
OUR SON WAS  
WORKING WITH  
BROADWAY  
PROFESSIONALS  
AND GETTING  
VOCAL AND  
ACTING LESSONS  
FROM PEOPLE  
WHO ACTUALLY  
ACTED ON  
BROADWAY WAS  
STUNNING.”

Jennifer Suhr

Jennifer and Matt Suhr saw the profound benefits of dance and theater experience in their son and daughter and now are enthusiastic supporters of Des Moines Performing Arts.



# NURTURING A PASSION FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Altoona Family Appreciates Dance and Theater Programs for Youth

**J**ennifer Suhr, a longtime dance instructor from Altoona, knows how important dance can be to young people. So donating to Des Moines Performing Arts in support of its Dance Series is a given for her and her husband, Matt.

They have seen the program's value, the Suhrs agree. "The year my daughter turned 14 was the inaugural season of the Dance Series program at the Civic Center," Jennifer says. "We were trying to find a birthday gift that would have meaning to her at that age. She really enjoyed dancing, so we looked into opportunities for her through Des Moines Performing Arts."

The Suhrs' donor exclusive opportunities that year included access to the Patron Circle Lounge, master classes and invitations to the cast parties after performances. There, young Abigail Suhr was able to interact with professional dancers, including the California-based Diavolo dance company.

"For a 14-year-old dancer, that was kind of amazing," Jennifer says. "They spent at least an hour talking with my daughter and asking her questions about her dreams and what she wanted to do with dance, as if she was the only person in the room. That had a profound impact on her desire to be a dancer."

Today, Abigail is a junior dance major at Luther College in Decorah.

The Suhrs' son, Daniel, was a competitive soccer player as a youngster. But after a couple of years of "nudging" by his parents, he agreed to audition for a children's theater production in Altoona.

"The bug bit him hard, and he's rarely been offstage since," Matt Suhr says.

The Suhrs enrolled Daniel—now a computer science major at Luther College—in one of DMPA's youth camp programs called Broadway Summer Intensive.

"The fact that our son was working with Broadway professionals and getting vocal and acting lessons from people who actually acted on Broadway was stunning," Jennifer says.

Later, Daniel was nominated twice for the Iowa High School Musical Theater Award program's "Triple Threat" award (a theatrical "triple threat" being someone who can sing, dance and act). "I can't even begin to explain how amazing the IHSMTA program is," Jennifer says.

The Suhrs recently made a donation to the IHSMTA program in memory of Matt's mother, who died last summer.

"She loved musical theater, and we thought we would really like to benefit the IHSMTA," Jennifer says. "Des Moines Performing Arts made the decision to expand that program statewide, and I knew it was not free. It costs money, and I want other kids to have the same experiences." ■

## 18\_DANCE SERIES



DMPA's Dance Series is soaring, presenting top-tier professional companies to enthusiastic audiences.





EVERY DANCE TELLS A STORY

Commitment to Dance Growing Step by Step

## 20 DANCE SERIES

**D**ance has grown by leaps and bounds at Des Moines Performing Arts, which has earned a national reputation for presenting top-flight touring dance troupes and for commissioning new dances.

“Our support of dance bolsters our reputation and position within the national arts community and especially within the dance community,” says Eric Olmscheid, director of programming and education. “It makes DMPA a more desirable booking engagement. Every company wants to be part of our Dance Series family.”

The Dance Series and its related activities are a treasure for local dance enthusiasts, Olmscheid says. “Professional dancers work with local dancers through master classes and connect with non-dancers with community workshops. We also offer educational programs, in the classroom and at the Civic Center, for fourth through twelfth-grade students. I don’t think there is any other single art form or kind of programming that we connect with in so many ways, which makes dance one of the most exciting areas we work on.”

Until the Dance Series was initiated seven years ago, no regular opportunity existed for Des Moines audiences to experience its level of professional dancing locally. Since then, even seasoned dancers have been surprised by what they’ve seen.

“We’ve developed a curated world-class series that fills a void in the cultural fabric of our community,” Olmscheid says.

Rarely do ticket sales cover the cost of dance programs in any market, Olmscheid says. So DMPA

finances the Dance Series through its operational budget, derived entirely from donations.


The 2017 Dance Series includes three productions for a season-ticket price starting at \$50. Tickets for single shows also are available. A bonus for DMPA audiences is a format designed to make dance more inviting and accessible.

“We host ‘DANCEtalk,’ an hour before each production,” says Barb Preuss, director of marketing. “Audience members can join the artistic staff to discuss that evening’s performance. And, after each show, they can talk with the dance companies in the theater. We want to help audiences recognize that every dance show tells a story—often of love, loss, redemption, perseverance, joy, irony and the human spirit.”

DMPA’s dance programs go beyond traditional ballet, Olmscheid says, but may include contemporary ballet or contemporary dance, often built around a theme. For example, New York choreographer Kyle Abraham’s riveting program “Abraham.In.Motion”—presented at the Civic Center Feb. 1, 2017—is three pieces woven together on the compelling themes of identity and racial injustice. The show incorporates hip-hop, jazz, ballet and modern dance.

“The arts community is able to take on and address some of these social justice issues like no one else can,” Preuss says. “They allow us to examine it through another lens and on an emotional level that inspire us to *feel* something.”

Watching the level of talent onstage for the Dance Series can be extremely satisfying and rewarding, Preuss says. “If you learn more about it,” she adds, “you might really love it.” ■



A dramatic retelling of a classic tale comes to life in Malandain Ballet Biarritz's BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

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## BACKSTAGE

### A CULTURAL ADVENTURE

Before Des Moines Performing Arts introduced its Dance Series, longtime Director of Marketing **Barb Preuss** says she had no sense of dance as art.

"I knew Broadway, I knew concerts, I knew comedy," Preuss says. "But I never really had been exposed to dance."

She realized there were stories embedded in the dances but, she says, "I just didn't know what they were."

DMPA's goal is to make dance less intimidating to others who may feel the same way. DANCETalk sessions before and after performances help explain the artistry and athleticism of dance. And ticket prices are kept low, as a way of inviting everyone—not just dance aficionados—to sample professional dance performances.

"We want people to approach our Dance Series as a cultural adventure," Preuss says.



## 22 BROADWAY SERIES



Wondrous technical stagecraft takes theater-goers into the mind of the show's teenage protagonist in *THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME*.



# INSIDE A TEEN'S MIND

## Set Designer Draws Audience Into a Troubled Mental Realm

**T**he best-known and most popular of Des Moines Performing Arts' programs is its thriving Willis Broadway Series.

"For a market our size, we have a remarkably large season-ticket subscription base," says DMPA Director of Development Cherian Koshy. "That's an enormous benefit in attracting bookings, because producers know they've already sold 12,000 tickets. They've got a huge lead, and they know they'll make money."

The 2016-2017 Willis Broadway Series has offered a string of proven stage favorites, plus Tony Award-winning new shows, such as *THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME*.

### AMAZING STAGECRAFT

The show features a set designed to take the audience inside the mind of a teenager who is a mathematical whiz, but who struggles to empathize with other people and who is unable to understand anything beyond the literal meaning of what he hears. The set design evolved over a period of time.

"I got a call from Marianne Elliott, the director," recalls Bunny Christie of London, the show's set and costume designer. "She rung me and asked if I knew the book."

"The book" is the hugely popular 2003 novel by British writer John Haddon about 15-year-old Christopher, who deals with an unnamed condition assumed to be related to the autism spectrum.

The story follows Christopher's quest to find the killer of his neighbor's dog. By the end of the play, he has traveled to London, found his long-lost mother and written a book about his adventures.

After considering setting scenes in a school's hallway, Christie decided that the play should be more abstract and should take audiences inside Christopher's mind and imagination.

"I suggested that it should be his world, rather than a world that we would instantly recognize," Christie says. "Sometimes he's really comfortable there, and it's really ordered, all mathematical, and he's in charge of it. But sometimes he gets very anxious. It's out of control and it becomes random and fragmented."

Part of Christie's challenge in designing the set involved moving the story through several locations and periods of time. The first half is "kind of a murder mystery," she says. The second half takes Christopher through a chaotic train station and to London. The set incorporates sophisticated lighting and video projections in rapidly moving sequences.

## 24\_BROADWAY SERIES

### SET ON A GRID

To represent Christopher's mathematical method of processing information, Christie says, "the whole set is numbered kind of on X and Y axes. We had to be absolutely precise about where to stand. It was all a system of math."

Because Christopher's mind goes back and forth in time, the original show used mechanical devices such as traps in the floor to move the action. On tour in different theaters, the set designer had to employ other techniques.

"We kind of designed a kit," Christie says. "It all packs up and goes in a truck and then is unpacked. It's a bit like a spaceship that lands in the theater."

The kit is basically a three-sided black box divided by a network of white lines into smaller black boxes. Chaos ensues—through projections of light, sound and visuals—whenever the outside world intrudes into that perfect grid of Christopher's mind.

### A UNIVERSAL MESSAGE

Christie says audiences who aren't familiar with the "Curious Incident" book or play may be quite surprised at the production. And even those who are aware of the show's complex set will be awestruck. "Either is fine," she says. "It's a great story. It's funny and moving and thought-provoking. That's because it's about family and relationships within the family. Sometimes that's really difficult, and we all know that. But sometimes you can really work hard and accommodate all the difficulties within families." ■



The discovery of a mysterious collection of letters helps the protagonist find an illuminating truth in *THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME*.



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## BACKSTAGE

### THE FINANCIAL CORE

People are often surprised to learn that only one program at Des Moines Performing Arts is self-supporting: The popular Willis Broadway Series is DMPA's performance powerhouse.

"All our other programs require financial support," says President and CEO **Jeff Chelesvig**. "We cannot charge enough for tickets for the others to cover the cost of those shows. So the other programs all depend on help from our generous donors."



## 26 ECONOMIC IMPACT



Cowles Commons and the Des Moines Civic Center glow brilliantly on a summer evening, tandem tributes to the cultural vitality of the city.





## HIGH EXPECTATIONS

How DMPA Transformed Downtown from End to End

## 28 ECONOMIC IMPACT

**N**o pressure. No pressure at all. “I remember meeting civic leader David Kruidenier for the first time in 1995,” says Jeff Chelesvig, president and CEO of Des Moines Performing Arts. “He said, ‘I have high expectations about what this facility should be.’ I needed to navigate a road map to meet those expectations.”

Historically, theaters were a huge element in drawing people to downtown Des Moines. Half a century ago, people flocked to the iconic KRNT Theater and an array of landmark movie houses. When KRNT closed in 1972 and movie theaters slipped away to the suburbs, audiences drifted elsewhere.

“There was a gap of time where, if you wanted to see a live performance, you went to Ames to Stephens Auditorium or to Hoyt Sherman Auditorium,” Chelesvig says.

In the 1970s, civic leaders proposed a new performing arts center to replace KRNT Theater. When a local bond option for the project failed, supporters formed a privately held, not-for-profit corporation to build and run the Civic Center of Greater Des Moines, which opened in 1979.

### A HUGE SUCCESS

Today, Des Moines Performing Arts is central Iowa’s premier performing arts organization, grossing \$18 million per year. It hosts nearly 400 shows and events annually at the Civic Center, Stoner Theater, the Temple Theater and Cowles Commons. The

Civic Center is the performing home of the Des Moines Symphony.

“We’re in the top 25 of Pollstar Magazine’s live-theater venues based on annual ticket sales,” Chelesvig says. “Our Willis Broadway Series has more than 12,000 season-ticket holders. That’s a larger base than Minneapolis. We are doing the same level of business as cities that are five times our size.”

Des Moines Performing Arts is also a huge selling tool for the Greater Des Moines Convention & Visitors Bureau, says President and CEO Greg Edwards. “The shows and the venues are a draw for many meeting, convention and event planners,” he says.

DMPA is a regional cultural attraction, agrees Paul Rottenberg, president of Orchestrate Hospitality, which operates Centro, Django, Malo, Bubba, Zombie Burger and Gateway Market.

“This is a key part of making Des Moines a destination,” Rottenberg says. “Bars and dining can’t do this alone. DMPA creates hotel overnights and a reason to spend that extra day in Des Moines.”

### ‘TRIPLE’ IMPACT

About 15 years ago, Chelesvig heard a radio report about a producer acquaintance in Minneapolis who had a long-running show called TRIPLE ESPRESSO. Chelesvig headed north to see it.


“I thought it was a hoot,” he recalls. “I wanted to bring it here, but all DMPA venues were being used.”

Lack of space was not a new challenge for Chelesvig. He’d already been scouting around downtown in search of a building that could become another theater. Then Chris Greenfield, head of the



**“DMPA CREATES  
HOTEL  
OVERNIGHTS  
AND A REASON  
TO SPEND THAT  
EXTRA DAY IN  
DES MOINES.”**

Paul Rottenberg  
President, Orchestrate Hospitality



The comic showpiece  
TRIPLE ESPRESSO played a  
pivotal role in the success of the  
Temple Theater. The show's  
extended run cemented the  
Temple's new role as an intimate  
theater and helped stimulate the  
neighborhood's growth.

## 30 ECONOMIC IMPACT

Downtown Community Alliance, took him to speak with Harry Bookey at a renovation project in the historic Masonic Temple.

“We met Harry and went up to the second floor,” Chelesvig says. “I saw this big, ugly room—but it had high ceilings, and I thought it could work.”

TRIPLE ESPRESSO opened in the renovated space—rechristened the Temple Theater—in 2002 and ran for 68 weeks.

“At that time, there was nothing west of the Temple,” Chelesvig says. “Nationwide was starting to build across the street, and the dream of the sculpture park didn’t materialize for a long time. The library was just starting construction, and the city was taking some steps to get rid of some of the eyesores in that area.”

Rottenberg and Chelesvig helped transformed the corner of Tenth and Locust streets into a destination where people could dine at Centro, catch a show and finish with coffee at Starbucks.

“The response was remarkable,” Rottenberg says. “An unnoticed corner that had previously been known for a pawnshop and weekend loop scoopers became the epicenter of downtown dining and entertainment.”

### NEW ‘TOWN CENTER’

Cowles Commons, the piazza west of the Civic Center, was created in the 1970s as Nollen Plaza. The city owns the space, and DMPA has a 99-year lease for its use.

Since its renovation in 2015, Cowles Commons has become a favorite site for events—a relaxing destination for families and a backyard for downtown dwellers. The Commons’ red granite and

brick surface can accommodate more than 3,000 people—and it can serve multiple events at once.

Events have ranged from weekly yoga sessions and pop-up dinners to weddings and a winter market. In 2017, DMPA will introduce “Commons Off the Clock,” a recurring happy hour event with live music, reminiscent of the popular Seniom Sed held in the early days of Nollen Plaza.

Natasha Sayles, executive director of Winefest Des Moines, says Cowles Commons is the ideal venue for its annual event. “It is convenient and affordable,” she says. “It has a wonderful metropolitan feel, and it is quickly becoming the epicenter of Des Moines.”

The transformation of Nollen Plaza into Cowles Commons stemmed from a DMPA capital campaign in 2007. “We had a laundry list of things that needed to be done at the Civic Center,” recalls Chelesvig. “I called on Charlie Edwards, and the first thing he said was, ‘What are you going to do about Nollen Plaza?’ I give a lot of credit to Charlie for that.”

Edwards, president of the Cowles Family Foundation, knew then that Nollen Plaza had fallen into disrepair. That was a particular concern because his uncle, the late David Kruidenier, was instrumental in supporting the creation of both the Civic Center and Nollen Plaza.

Chelesvig and Edwards met with Des Moines Art Center Director Jeff Fleming and architect Cal Lewis, who was associated with Charles Herbert and Associates, the firm that designed the Civic Center.

Fleming recommended contacting artist Jim Campbell, who eventually created the site’s “Swirl” sculpture. And they recruited landscape architect

Ken Smith, an Iowa native, to design the renovation.

Early in the planning stages, the Cowles family realized that the renovation was going to be expensive, Edwards says. They also knew that other donors would look to their lead in supporting the \$13 million undertaking.

"We made a decision as a family to donate \$5 million to the project," Edwards says.

That directly led to more million-dollar gifts, Chelesvig says. Major donors included the Principal Financial Group, Bill and Susan Knapp, the Lauridsen family, Vision Iowa, the city of Des Moines, Prairie Meadows, Wells Fargo and Polk County.

As Edwards noted, many people were very important to the renovation project. "I'm pleased I was able to be a part of what started out as just a very vague notion," he says, "and actually see that through to what it is today, which is a very successful community square." ■

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## BACKSTAGE

### MAKE IT 'PERFECT'

Almost every day around 7:30 a.m., as Des Moines Performing Arts' Vice President and Chief Operating Officer **Laura Sweet** arrives at her office in the Civic Center, she waves to a familiar figure across the street at Cowles Commons. At that early hour, the woman on the receiving end of Sweet's wave is already at work as an ambassador for Operation Downtown, which provides cleaning, safety and hospitality services to the area.

The scene never fails to tug at Sweet's emotions, because it exemplifies how community members have embraced the renovated space as their own. "Cowles Commons is her baby," Sweet says. "She makes sure everything is perfect there."



## 32 BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND STAFF

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