

cue

INSIDE DES MOINES PERFORMING ARTS
2018





Lights illuminate one
of the Civic Center's main
dressing rooms.

WELCOME

Your generosity ensures Des Moines will continue to celebrate the best of performing arts.

Des Moines Performing Arts has a lot to celebrate. Our rich tradition of welcoming the best of Broadway to Des Moines is punctuated by hosting three of the top 2016 Tony Award winners: *Hamilton* (Best Musical), *The Color Purple* (Best Revival of a Musical), and *The Humans* (Best Play), all in their first year of touring. We are one of the only markets in the country to present all three in the same season, and our audiences have reacted to this powerful lineup by purchasing a record 16,200 season ticket packages to our Willis Broadway Series.

Our Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards program now reaches across the state and has 68 schools participating this year. That is quite a difference from our initial nine participating schools just a few short years ago. The start of the 2017-18 Willis Broadway Series brought with it another special milestone: our 10 millionth guest, and an opportunity to continue our support of local arts education (read more about this on page 36).

These great milestones are only possible because of your generosity and loyalty. Your support ensures that more than 55,000 students are able to experience live theater as part of their



classroom curriculum through our Applause Series. It's your gift that ensures world-class dance troupes perform on the Civic Center stage and work with young people in the community to build their skills. Your commitment allows families to attend special theater performances in our Wellmark Family Series for about the same cost as seeing a movie.

As we prepare to announce our 40th Anniversary season, I want to thank you for making the performing arts a priority. I hope you enjoy this issue of Cue and all of the stories you made possible.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff Chelesvig". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.



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This page: Students perform at the Awards Showcase, the highlight of the year for participants in Des Moines Performing Arts' Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards program. The Showcase is staged at the Des Moines Civic Center every spring.

Opposite page: Ahoy Matey! Pella Christian High School students take to the high seas during a recent school production. The school participates in DMPA's Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards program.

STUDENTS TAKE CENTER STAGE

Vibrant program focuses on education,
recognition and celebration.



06 ENRICHMENT

Young theatrical talent is waiting to be discovered across Iowa, and one robust Des Moines Performing Arts program is now reaching students in every corner of the state.

The multifaceted Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards (IHSMTA) program began in 2013 not only to honor the extraordinary talent of students involved in their school's musical theater programs, but also to provide constructive feedback and to offer learning opportunities to both students and teachers.

"We started with nine participating schools in a 45-mile radius of Des Moines," says Eric B. Olmscheid, DMPA's director of programming and education. "Then we expanded to 17 schools within a 90-mile radius. The third year, we had 30 schools in a 125-mile radius. In 2016, we took the massive jump to 60 schools across the entire state."

The program's reviews are glowing. "Performance is meant to be recognized," says IHSMTA adjudicator Andy Lesieur of Cedar Rapids. The program "not only encourages those creating high school productions, it provides higher quality content for Iowa audiences. Iowa theater across the board will reap the benefit of the culture this program is destined to develop."

Approximately 60 performing arts educators and professionals serve as adjudicators in the IHSMTA program's musical review component. In teams of three or four, they attend productions at participating schools and then constructively critique lead and supporting roles, dancers, the ensemble, orchestra, stage and music direction, choreography, lighting, scenic design, sound, hair and makeup, costumes, overall audience experience, and community involvement.

DETAILED FEEDBACK

A freelance director, performer and studio instructor, Lesieur reviews about five high school performances each academic year and prepares detailed feedback. "All the students receive from me are my written words, so I choose my words wisely so as to not discourage them while explaining how they can improve upon their talents," he says.

Chelsea Haaland, director of musical theater at Waukee High School, says she especially appreciates IHSMTA recognition for behind-the-scenes efforts. "Students who work backstage are often the unsung heroes of a production—ones who work countless hours without a bow or audience ovation, but rather for the sake of creating a quality product," she says.

At the annual Awards Showcase at the Civic Center, Iowa high school students earn recognition for their musical theater performances.



“PERFORMANCE
IS MEANT TO
BE RECOGNIZED.”

Andy Lesieur

08_ENRICHMENT

A little applause can have a big effect on young people, Haaland adds. “A group of students working on publicity for Waukeez’s productions received such praise [from adjudicators] that several are now pursuing marketing-related majors at college,” she says.

MORE CHANCES TO GROW

IHSMTA also provides educational opportunities, such as a summer Tech Intensive program and master classes with touring Broadway companies and stars.

“Our students have had access to some incredible opportunities through IHSMTA, and that alone has expanded the learning far beyond what we might be able to provide in our program alone,” Haaland says.

One of her students was selected to work with Tony Award-winning actor Sutton Foster in a master class, she says: “The boost in confidence for the student was noticeable, and she has since held several major roles in area community productions.”

The highlight of the year for IHSMTA participants is the spring Awards Showcase at the Civic Center. Based on adjudicator recommendations, schools are invited to perform excerpts from their musical productions. Students also present special medleys, guided by a professional choreographer and music director from New York.

In 2017, a new component was added to the Awards Showcase: displays in the Civic Center lobby highlighting outstanding technical work. “No other program in the state features technical work in this

way,” Haaland says. “While several of our students were certainly empowered and humbled to present their work from our school’s production, they were in absolute awe of the work presented from other schools. The respect between artists and the admiration from viewing audience members was immeasurable, and helped cement the importance and significance of student technical work.”

OPPORTUNITY AND RECOGNITION

Anne Martens, a West Des Moines parent, says the Awards Showcase offers all the teachers and students involved in a musical production both opportunity and recognition.

“They spend so many hours learning lines, creating sets, sewing costumes, adjusting lights and sound, and rehearsing,” says Martens, whose daughter, Jessica, is a past Iowa representative at the National High School Musical Theatre Awards in New York. Jessica now is majoring in musical theater and vocal performance at Oklahoma City University. “To be able to showcase all of their talents in a statewide event is a wonderful way to celebrate their hard work.”

She adds that each year, the IHSMTA participants seem more talented. “I think this is in part because the program is a valuable learning tool for educators and students alike. Each year they can witness new show ideas and learn from the others on the stage,” Martens says. “Our family can’t thank the Des Moines Performing Arts staff and [longtime lead IHSMTA donors] Doug and Debbie West enough for the incredible opportunity that our daughter received.” ■

"Triple Threat Award" winners Marisa Spahn and Seamus Foley were recognized for their stellar singing, dancing and acting.

'TRIPLE THREAT' WINNERS ACT, SING, DANCE

Each year, the Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards program names one male and one female performer as "Triple Threat Award" winners to recognize their excellence at singing, dancing and acting. Winners spend nine days in New York City at the National High School Musical Theatre Awards. The event includes private coaching, master classes, rehearsals with professionals and a showcase performed on a Broadway stage.

The National High School Musical Theatre Awards workshop schedule "was very intense," says 2017 winner Marisa Spahn, 17, a senior at Waukee High School. "We went to breakfast at around 7 a.m. and finished between 9 and 10 p.m."

There was little time for sightseeing, she says. "But we did get to go to a fancy dinner at Sardi's and then to a fantastic Broadway show, *Come From Away*," she says.

The talent level of students from around the country was "a little overwhelming," Spahn says. "It makes you realize that you have to work really hard and be very persistent if you want to pursue a career as a performer. It will also take some luck."

Spahn plans to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in musical theater. "I can't express how grateful I am for the Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards program," she says. "It is so amazing that high school musical theater students can come together and share their passion for their art. It is beautiful that our efforts are recognized and that we receive so much support."

Iowa's other 2017 representative, Seamus Foley, 18, of Dubuque, is now a performing arts student at Clarke College in Dubuque. He was designated a Special Recognition Scholar at the national event and received a \$2,500 scholarship.

"This trip is something that I will never stop thanking DMPA for, and something I will never forget," Foley says. In addition to being coached by notable Broadway producers and actors, he met Tony Award-winner and *Dear Evan Hansen* star Ben Platt, who helped him shoot a Snapchat video.

"After I recorded it, I was shaking for minutes," Foley says. "But the video is forever immortalized on my Instagram."



10_SPOTLIGHT

Hearing-impaired her entire life and deaf for nearly 60 years, Gwendolyn Mix has been able to attend many productions because of the presence of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters at musicals presented by Des Moines Performing Arts.



“MY SISTER FELT ACCESS TO THE ARTS IS IMPORTANT FOR ENRICHING PEOPLE’S LIVES. I AGREE.”

Gwendolyn Mix

MISSION MOMENT

GWENDOLYN MIX

The longtime patron's gift will help improve accessibility for deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

Gwendolyn Mix of Pleasant Hill is a big fan of Des Moines Performing Arts. Through the years, the 93-year-old has enjoyed watching a host of Broadway musicals—although she's never heard one note of their music.

Gwendolyn has been hearing-impaired since childhood and totally deaf for nearly 60 years. But because of the presence of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters at musicals presented by Des Moines Performing Arts, she has been able to appreciate dozens of productions.

The Lion King is her favorite musical. "I really liked the large animal puppets," Gwendolyn says. "Deaf people miss so much if performances—even circus-like productions—are not interpreted."

Gwendolyn grew up in Linden and has lived in the Des Moines area 75 years. Along the way, she's been a performer herself, after learning to play the piano as a child. "Back then, with my hearing aids, I could hear the low notes," she says.

Gwendolyn graduated from the Iowa School for the Deaf in Council Bluffs, St. Joseph's Academy in Des Moines and Coe College in Cedar Rapids. "It was hard because I had no sign language interpreters," she says. "I had to use lecture notes

from other people and sit near the front to watch the professors."

After college, she trained to become a medical lab technician and worked at Iowa Methodist Hospital in hematology, the blood bank and the microbiology lab. But outside of work, she often attended Civic Center performances with her sister, Greta Faye Mix.

"She loved going to the Civic Center," Gwendolyn says. "My sister felt access to the arts is important for enriching people's lives. I agree.

"For this reason, I gave a gift—on behalf of my deceased sister and myself—to help both deaf and hard-of-hearing people to have more and improved opportunities to enjoy performances. These opportunities are important services for the hearing-impaired community."

Gwendolyn's donation of \$50,000 will help Des Moines Performing Arts provide ASL interpreters and fund other outreach programs for deaf or hearing-impaired people. She says she hopes the deaf community becomes well-informed about the Civic Center's ASL services and other opportunities.

"I hope people will be grateful and take advantage of the opportunities provided," she says. "I want to inspire other people to provide more ways and gifts that improve the accessibility of the arts for the deaf and hard-of-hearing people." ■

12_HERITAGE



The Des Moines Civic Center around 1983, about four years after construction was completed. Photo courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

IN THE BEGINNING

Spurred by a strong vision, civic leaders guided the creation of the Des Moines Civic Center.



14_HERITAGE

As the Des Moines Civic Center approaches its 40th Anniversary season, its beginning is still vivid in the mind of longtime community leader J.C. “Buz” Brenton, a key figure in the establishment of the Civic Center.

“It’s one of the few things I haven’t forgotten,” the octogenarian jokes.

The tale of the Civic Center’s creation usually starts with the 1972 demise of the iconic KRNT Theater. “A main reason people came downtown then was to go to a restaurant or a theater,” says Jeff Chelesvig, president and CEO of Des Moines Performing Arts. “When the theaters went away, history will tell you that was the beginning of more businesses moving to the suburbs.”

Hoping to revitalize downtown, a handful of civic leaders took action. “The vision of a performing arts center initially came from Jim Hubbell and others who went to the city and asked it to build this building,” Chelesvig says.

Enter supporting cast member Buz Brenton, a Des Moines native who had recently moved back

after living in Davenport. Hubbell’s idea for a performing arts center piqued Brenton’s interest.

“I just barged into some meetings they were having,” he recalls. “They wondered what I was doing there—and I didn’t know what I was doing there. But I had this interest.”

After a local bond option to fund the project failed to pass in 1974, Brenton spoke to David Kruidenier, a former classmate at Yale University and the publisher of The Des Moines Register.

“I said I was not going to bring my young family to this town if we can’t even have a performing arts center,” Brenton says. “The capital of the state of Iowa without a performing arts hall? Let’s get real. That can’t be.”

Kruidenier took the remarks simply as “cocktail conversation”—until Brenton followed up with a note saying, “I meant what I said. I’ll help you in any way I can.”

Kruidenier soon joined with banker John Fitzgibbon to launch a fundraising effort that produced more than \$9 million in pledges from private sources within 90 days.

“It was astounding that they were able to do that

WIDE SPACES, TOP ACOUSTICS AND A 'TOWN GREEN'

COMMUNITY LEADER BUZ BRENTON
RECALLS THESE LITTLE-KNOWN
HISTORICAL TIDBITS ABOUT PLANNING
THE DES MOINES CIVIC CENTER:

Selecting an architect. Charles Herbert & Associates created the Civic Center's award-winning design, but that firm initially wasn't considered. "We interviewed a fine, fancy New York architectural firm," Brenton says. "These guys gave us a perfunctory, normal presentation, which I didn't like at all. I had to leave the meeting early, so I left a note on [David Kruidenier's] desk and said that we should interview Chick Herbert. He had done a lot of buildings for our banking organization, and we thought he was pretty good. So that's how we got Herbert."

No balconies. "Kruidenier didn't like balconies. He thought they were elitist," Brenton says. As a result, the Civic Center features a fan-shaped seating area with wide spaces between rows and no dividing aisles. "In that building, you can look down and see people," Brenton says. "I always thought that was part of the experience in performing arts. I wanted something so people could see and be seen."



Buz Brenton

Sounds good. The Civic Center is known for its fine acoustics, which were developed by Paul S. Veneklasen & Associates. "We had heard Veneklasen had done acoustics for Hancher Auditorium at the University of Iowa and Iowa State's Stephens Auditorium," Brenton says. "So that's how he was hired."

Noticeable absence. Kruidenier was out of town for the Civic Center's long-awaited opening. "Probably on purpose," Brenton says. "He didn't want to make a big show. The symphony played Beethoven's Ninth. There were comments by a few people, and that was it. It was pretty simple, but it was a full house."

Outside influence. "In front of Yale University and in all New England towns, there were town greens," Brenton says. "I said, 'Dave, we can't just build this thing; we need something around it. You don't just build a beautiful home; you want a lawn.'" As a result, Nollen Plaza—now Cowles Commons—was created.

16_HERITAGE

and design a building that has withstood the test of time,” Chelesvig says.

Construction was planned on two blocks of property provided by the city of Des Moines, and the Des Moines Civic Center opened in 1979.

“So that’s how it happened,” Brenton says. “We lived happily ever after. End of the story.”

Well, not quite.

The fledgling Civic Center organization quickly realized it didn’t know how to effectively program events. “The first year or two were rocky,” Brenton acknowledges.

But the Civic Center persevered to become one of the nation’s most successful performance venues, ranking consistently among Pollstar’s list of the top 25 theaters in the world in terms of annual ticket sales.

Brenton says it’s been gratifying to watch the success of DMPA and the Civic Center. “I’m just happy to have been part of these things in this glorious city we live in,” he says. “It’s been a lot of fun.” ■


FOUR IN ONE

Today, Des Moines Performing Arts operates the Civic Center, Temple Theater, Cowles Commons and Stoner Theater.

“DMPA has become well-known for bringing world-class performances to Des Moines, but those engagements are booked for only about 20 weeks each year,” says Director of Development Cherian Koshy. “For the other 32 weeks, we have educational programming, bus-in programs for students through our Applause Series and professional development for teachers.”

DMPA venues also accommodate its Dance Series, which includes performances and educational workshops, and they serve as performing homes to the Des Moines Symphony and Pyramid Theatre Company.

All these events, programs and performances keep the four venues constantly packed, giving patrons countless ways to experience and enjoy DMPA’s exciting offerings.

A wide-angle photograph of a large audience seated in a modern theater hall. The audience is seen from behind, filling the lower two-thirds of the frame. They are looking towards a dark stage area. The theater has a high, white, geometric ceiling with recessed lighting. Large, light-colored columns are visible on the right side of the stage. The overall atmosphere is one of a grand, modern performance space.

Opened in 1979, the 2,744-seat Main Hall is one of the nation's most successful performance venues.

AT THE CIVIC CENTER, "YOU CAN LOOK DOWN AND SEE PEOPLE. I ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT WAS PART OF THE EXPERIENCE IN PERFORMING ARTS. I WANTED SOMETHING SO PEOPLE CAN SEE AND BE SEEN."

Buz Brenton

18_SPOTLIGHT

Caleb Olson-Daniel, 9, and his brother, Noah, 10, are already veteran performers, thanks to their participation in Des Moines Performing Arts' summer Musical Theater Camps.



**“I REALLY LIKE
HOW THE
SETS WORK ON
THE STAGE.”**

Caleb Olson-Daniel

**“I’M ALREADY
WRITING
MUSICALS.”**

Noah Olson-Daniel

MISSION MOMENT

CALEB AND NOAH OLSON-DANIEL

As summer Musical Theater Camp participants, the two brothers have performed in musical productions at the Civic Center.

When his teacher calls on Caleb Olson-Daniel, he's more than ready to recite in front of other students. All the world's a stage, after all, even his fourth-grade classroom at Bergman Academy.

They may be young, but Caleb, 9, and his fifth-grade brother, Noah, 10, are already veteran Civic Center performers. Their breakthroughs into theater came at Des Moines Performing Arts' summer Musical Theater Camp, a weeklong workshop that allows young artists to explore their talents and skills as musical theater actors in musical productions.

Their parents, Nate and Martine Olson-Daniel of Des Moines, heard about the camp from friends. "Our kids loved acting out stories at home, so we were very interested in introducing them to theater," Martine says. "This is actually their favorite day camp, and their younger siblings, Asher, 7, and Kaia, 6, cannot wait to be old enough to attend as well."

Each Musical Theater Camper is guaranteed a role in a production, and the young cast rehearses throughout the week. Participants also explore the technical parts of a performance.

Rehearsals are the best part of camp, says Caleb, who performed the role of the Green Squire in *King Arthur's Quest*. Watch for him in future playbills, because he would like to become a professional actor someday.

Caleb also likes watching sets come alive. "I really like how the sets work on the stage," he says. "Some things spin around. It's always a big surprise as to what's going to happen and how the scene is going to change."

Martine says she and Nate like that the kids experience the entire production process. "Each year, we see them grow, and this year we really felt all of the kids in the production did such a great job with their characters," she says. "It was clear they had worked on more than lines. They were really convincing with body language and facial expressions."

If Noah—who loves to read and loves stories—got a job in performing arts, he would like to be a director. Musical Theater Camp has inspired him to plan to be involved in theatrical productions in high school—and to attend performances at the Civic Center as an adult.

Noah also wants someday to become a writer, which may include the role of playwright. "I'm already writing musicals," he says. ■

DOWNTOWN'S 'TOWN SQUARE'

Cowles Commons provides an active and animated gathering spot for the community.

When Des Moines Performing Arts President and CEO Jeff Chelesvig makes his frequent treks to Broadway, he's often fortifying DMPA's dynamic lineup of shows. Assistant Guest Services Manager Miranda Lee flew to New York last year on a different mission.

Lee is garnering ideas for "Animating the Space" in DMPA's four venues, particularly the rejuvenated and rechristened Cowles Commons. A conference in New York sponsored by the nonprofit organization Project for Public Spaces provided valuable insight on using public spaces to build stronger communities.

"We walked around New York City and witnessed public spaces being active and animated," says Lee, who oversees activities at DMPA's only outdoor venue. "That's exactly what we're doing with

Cowles Commons: making it a very active space for the city of Des Moines."

For example, throughout September and October, Cowles Commons hosted Wellness Wednesdays, which offered free noontime activities such as yoga, dance and meditation; Tastes & Tidbits Thursdays, when residents could pick up lunch from a local food truck and participate in hands-on learning activities provided by local organizations; and Saturday Story & Sketch, featuring readings of children's literature and family-friendly art activities.

Those events followed the popular Commons Off the Clock, Cowles Commons' signature summer event co-presented by Des Moines Radio Group. The event debuted in 2017.

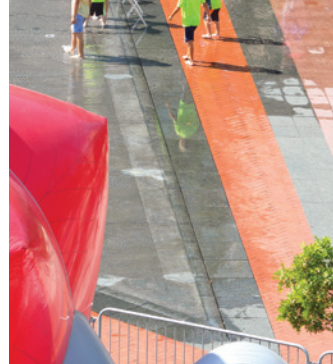
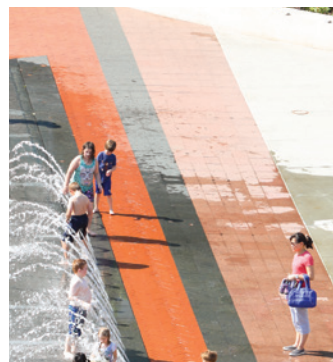
"It's a Friday after-work happy hour event with live music, food trucks and a beer vendor," Lee says. "We were very happy with the turnout and the response from the community."

Continues on page 24

Children adore frolicking—and keeping cool—in the zero-depth Lauridsen Fountain at Cowles Commons.







24 ENGAGEMENT

Continued from page 20

COMMUNITY GIFT

DMPA considers the revamped Cowles Commons a gift to the community, says Laura Sweet, vice president and chief operating officer. “We intentionally planned for Cowles Commons to be multifunctional and to be as safe as possible,” she says. “So it’s all on one level, and it has any number of configurations. It can serve multiple events at once.”

The site boasts several thousand perennial plants and 40 trees. The zero-depth Lauridsen Fountain—named in honor of a major donor to the project—delights kids of all ages, Sweet says. Art enthusiasts and community members enjoy the site’s original sculpture, “Crusoe Umbrella” by Claes Oldenburg, and the new “Swirl” sculpture by artist Jim Campbell, which accents the night sky with suspended illuminated LED lights.

On summer days, Cowles Commons may be the site for informal office meetings or food-truck lunches. “You can sit outside and meditate, read a book or unwind from a stressful day at work,” Sweet says. “Every single day, hundreds of kids and adults are running and playing in our fountain until midnight. We want Cowles Commons to be used, and people are using it in their own ways.”

The plaza is important to downtown residents, says Tony Filippi, president of the Downtown Neighborhood Association. “Cowles Commons serves as a community gathering space for downtown residents in the core,” he says. “Virtually none of the residents in downtown have traditional front yards, where many neighborhoods build community through interaction. Public parks and plazas play an important role for urban neighborhoods to provide space to meet each other. Cowles Commons’ fountain and large artwork also provide landmarks to show

visiting friends and family.”

But it’s not just downtown residents who gather here. “We love Cowles Commons,” says Jill Bouslog of Urbandale, who enjoys Cowles Commons with her family. In the summer, “we took our bag chairs and set them up near the water so we could kick off our shoes and keep our feet in the water to help stay cool. ... The entire area is a beautiful place to hang out.”

SPECIAL EVENTS

That appeal also has drawn numerous organizations and groups to hold their events in the space. So far, special events have ranged from an Iowa-Iowa State football pregame party to a Hillary Clinton campaign stop to a rally supporting appreciation of diversity. The Downtown Neighborhood Association has hosted its National Night Out event at Cowles Commons since the site reopened after its renovation.

“The large space allows us to host this event in a highly visible location in the heart of the neighborhood,” Filippi says. “The special events give downtown residents more opportunities to socialize with each other, and the events also show nonresidents that downtown does have an active community after 5 p.m.”

Many people are excited to learn that they can rent Cowles Commons, either the entire space or a portion of it, Lee says. It’s becoming a popular site for weddings, for example.

Rental fees don’t cover the cost of maintaining the venue, however. “A phenomenal amount of money is spent for its operation,” Sweet says. “We do get some subsidy from the city, but mostly we depend on donations to support our beautiful community center, Cowles Commons.” ■



Luminarium, an inflatable art structure that's half the size of a football field, attracted thousands of people to Cowles Commons. The maze dazzled guests with its domes, radiant colors and winding pathways.

THE PLACE TO BE

Since the renovated Cowles Commons opened in 2015, it's hosted a variety of community activities. Here's a sampling.

COMMONS OFF THE CLOCK

WINEFEST DES MOINES
IOWA PUBLIC RADIO'S
STORYCORPS
CIVIC MUSIC
ASSOCIATION'S
BELIN QUARTET
DOWNTOWN
NEIGHBORHOOD
ASSOCIATION'S NATIONAL
NIGHT OUT
WELLNESS WEDNESDAYS
TASTES & TIDBITS
THURSDAYS
SATURDAY STORY &
SKETCH
DES MOINES ART CENTER
GALA
HEALTHIEST STATE
INITIATIVE WALK
DOWNTOWN COMMUNITY
ALLIANCE'S WINTER
MARKET
HOOPS FEST
BOOTS AND BEER
CITY RIDE LAUNCH POINT
SOLHEIM CUP
ANNOUNCEMENT
MEDITATION AROUND
TOWN
AMERICAN CANCER
SOCIETY'S RELAY FOR
LIFE FOR CANCER
TOUCHDOWN TAILGATE
LUMINARIUM
TRUTH BOOTH
DES MOINES MARATHON
IOWA CITIZENS FOR
COMMUNITY ACTION TAX
DAY RALLY
BANKERS TRUST
CENTENNIAL EVENT
WALK FOR PEACE AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE
TONY AWARDS WATCH
PARTY

“THE IHSMTA
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HAVE HAD ON
THEIR OWN.”

Karen Niblock

Karen Niblock, the drama director of Nevada High School, says participating in DMPA's Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards program has boosted the quality of the school's performing arts department.



MISSION MOMENT

KAREN NIBLOCK

The drama director appreciates her school's thriving partnership with Des Moines Performing Arts.

In Karen Niblock's 12 years as drama director at Nevada High School, its Performing Arts Department has always enjoyed a rich pool of talent. But she's watched the department rise to new levels since becoming one of the inaugural participants six years ago in Des Moines Performing Arts' Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards (IHSMTA) program.

Not only has the IHSMTA program improved the quality of her school's performances, Niblock says, but it also helped the school obtain a \$10,000 grant from the Nevada School Foundation for upgrades to the school's sound system.

"The last three years, IHSMTA adjudicators commented on different aspects of our sound quality," Niblock says. "Using those comments, we worked with our auditorium manager on ideas that would take our tech headsets wireless, boost our signal strengths and add new microphone sets so all students on stage who have solos or speaking lines would be adequately supported."

IHSMTA feedback was included in the grant proposal to provide a solid basis for the request. "The foundation was very interested in the adjudicators' comments, and it helped us secure the large award,"

Niblock says. "This also will help give more use to our hearing assistance system and improve the quality of our shows."

With Des Moines Performing Arts as a resource, Niblock's job of directing plays and musicals at Nevada High School has changed significantly, she says. She now sends student stage managers to a DMPA class, where they learn to implement many procedures used by stage management professionals.

"The IHSMTA program has allowed us to give students opportunities that they would never have had on their own," Niblock says. "They work with Broadway directors, participate in workshops and experience theater on a level that they never dreamed they could achieve. The level of mastery in our program continues to grow each year as more of our students make the spring musical a priority in their schedule."

Today, more than 20 percent of the Nevada High School student body is involved in its performing arts program, she says.

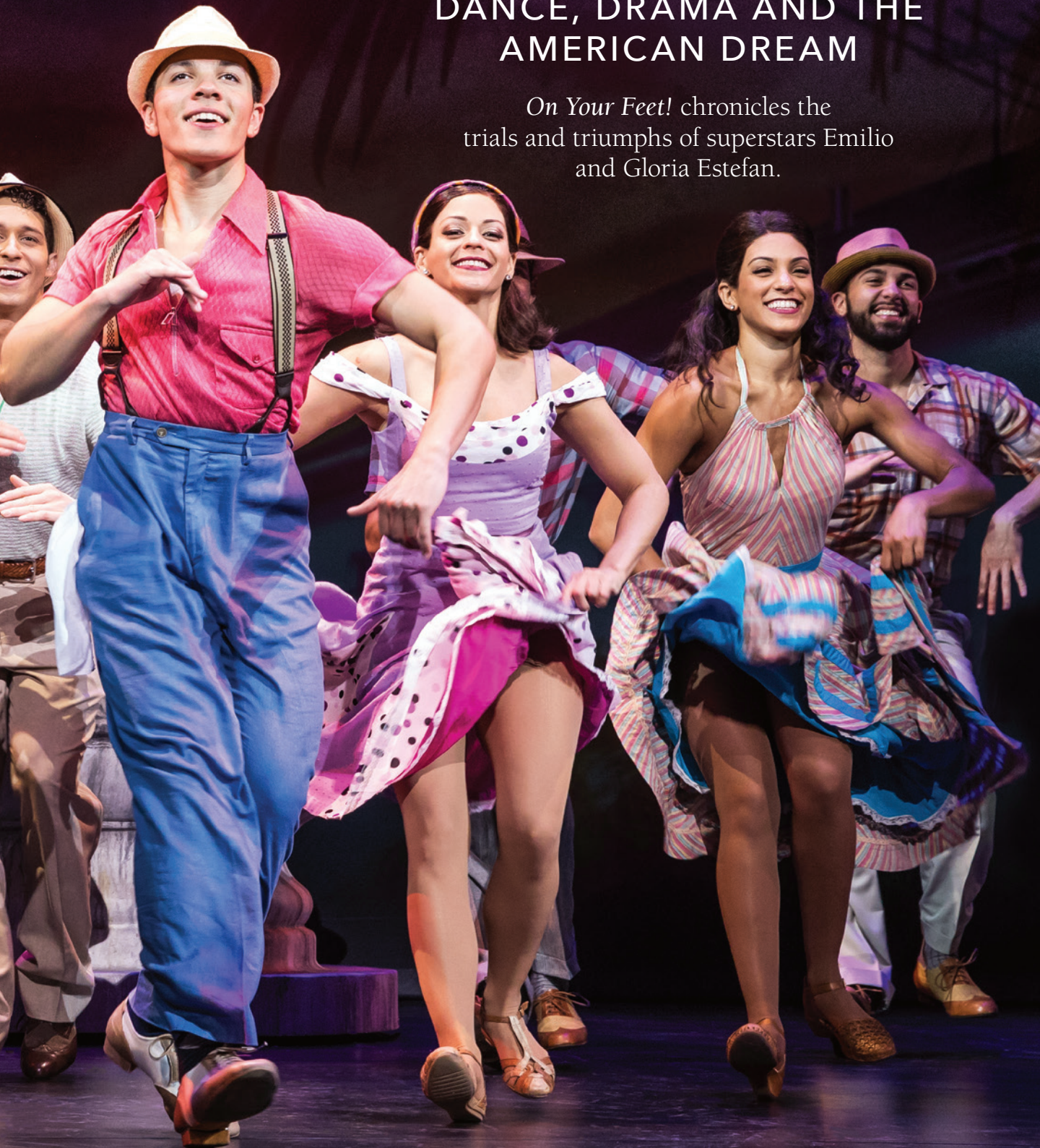
"I can't imagine where we would be without IHSMTA," Niblock says, "because it is an integral part of our program and a partnership that we plan to continue for many years." ■



Christie Prades portrays charismatic superstar Gloria Estefan in the touring production of *On Your Feet!* The show plays the Des Moines Civic Center Feb. 20-25. Photo © Matthew Murphy.

DANCE, DRAMA AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

On Your Feet! chronicles the
trials and triumphs of superstars Emilio
and Gloria Estefan.



Moving love stories always resonate with audiences at Des Moines Performing Arts' popular Willis Broadway Series. Boy and girl meet. Girl and boy fall in love. Together, boy and girl transcend cultural barriers, achieve international superstardom and reinforce the great American immigrant story.

On Your Feet! plays the Civic Center Feb. 20-25.

This musical love story is known to prompt audiences to dance in theater aisles, if not the streets. Based on the lives of 26-time Grammy Award-winning husband-and-wife team Emilio and Gloria Estefan, it's also the tale of two determined Cuban Americans, their challenges and their quest for the American Dream.

That was the intention of director Jerry Mitchell, choreographer Sergio Trujillo and book writer Alexander Dinelaris. "It's why I'm so proud of this show, and so excited to share the national tour with the rest of America," Trujillo says. "We're all immigrants, and we're all part of this wonderful country, which is made up of people of all colors and races. That is *On Your Feet!*"

The musical, which opened on Broadway in 2015, is punctuated with family drama. Gloria was a shy college student when her grandmother introduced her to Emilio, a young, enterprising percussionist and bandleader. Her grandmother then pressured Gloria to accept Emilio's invitation to sing at a rehearsal, despite the disapproval of Gloria's mother.

Gloria and Emilio fell in love and built a family, as well as a musical empire. They also diversified their interests, buying real estate, hotels and restaurants and becoming prominent citizens in Miami.

But the continuing disapproval of Gloria's mother eventually led to estrangement between mother and daughter that lasted until a horrible traffic accident left Gloria with a broken back. After doctors told Gloria she might never walk again, the singer dedicated herself to rehabilitation and reconciled with her mother.

All the major conflicts and incidents in the show reflect actual events, with details provided by Gloria and Emilio. "We had lots of meetings and talked for hours," writer Dinelaris says. "I eventually spent time with Gloria's mother, who recently passed. She was an amazing woman, tough as nails and charismatic,

As Grammy Award-winning Gloria Estefan, Christie Prades performs a dazzling number in the touring production of *On Your Feet!* Photo © Matthew Murphy.





in their roles as Gloria and Emilio Estefan in *On Your Feet!*, Christie Prades and Mauricio Martinez capture the couple's special connection. Photo © Matthew Murphy.

and she became a major character in the show. When I had all this information, I had to figure out which part of their story I would tell to make it the most effective.”

Director Mitchell sought to capture the special connection between the Estefans. “Their partnership displayed itself every day, in every way, down to eating lunch,” he says. “It was obvious how they took care of each other, how they were there for each other after all these years together, and that was exciting. They have such a strong sense of family, and I wanted to bring out that family dynamic.”

Trujillo, who received a Tony Award nomination for his choreography, immersed himself in all kinds of Cuban dance in order to capture the essence of the movement. “With Cubans, it feels like they’re playing congas with their feet,” he says. “It’s in their rib cages, it’s in the soul of who they are.”

The Estefans were determined to introduce Cuban conga songs to mainstream American audiences, but they met with resistance from record companies. In fact, the behind-the-scenes struggle to promote their new sound inspired one of the most applauded scenes in *On Your Feet!*

When a record executive suggests to Emilio that he should simplify his percussion and change his name, Emilio makes an impassioned speech about his family’s sacrifices, hardships and hard work. “You should look very closely at my face,” Emilio

DMPA IS PROUD TO BE AN INVESTOR IN *ON YOUR FEET!* (PRESENTED AT THE CIVIC CENTER FEB. 20-25) AS PART OF THE INDEPENDENT PRESENTERS NETWORK.

proclaims. “Because whether you know it or not, this is what an American looks like.”

Gloria’s 1985 mega-hit “Conga” proved to be the embodiment of the Estefans’ crossover dreams, becoming a mainstream sensation while holding firm to its Cuban roots.

On Your Feet!—a story about immigrants, about perseverance, about family—is about everyone, Dinelaris says. “On Broadway, I heard audiences say all the time, ‘That Cuban grandmother is my Jewish grandmother’ or ‘my Irish grandmother.’ It’s a universal story,” he says.

“The comment I heard more than anything else was, ‘It wasn’t what I expected. I expected the Gloria Estefan revue. I didn’t expect to be moved and to cry and to see my family in it. I didn’t expect the goosebumps and the tears. I just expected to have a good time,’” Dinelaris adds. “And I think that has to do with how we identify with family and with culture. I hope people leave the theater, go home and call their mothers.” ■

34 SPOTLIGHT



**“I AM HONORED
AND BLESSED TO
HAVE THIS
COMMUNITY OF
PEOPLE WHO
ARE EAGER TO
HELP ME PURSUE
MY DREAMS.”**

Alexis Houseman

Now a junior in college, Alexis Houseman says her experiences with Des Moines Performing Arts had a positive impact on her career path.

MISSION MOMENT

ALEXIS HOUSEMAN

A new world opened up for the student when she became involved with Des Moines Performing Arts.

For years—since she was 6 years old—Alexis Houseman dreamed of someday becoming a meteorologist. Then she met Janet Albanese, director of production and building services at Des Moines Performing

Arts, and a new world opened to her.

“During my sophomore year in high school, Janet hosted a training session for high school stage managers,” says Houseman, now 21. “She coached us through scenarios and offered different ways to approach our stage. My junior year, I was asked to join the first assistant stage manager team for the second annual Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards Showcase.”

Albanese became a mentor to Houseman, who is now a junior at Iowa State University, majoring in event management with minors in business, music technology and theater. Witnessing Albanese’s passion for her career made a tremendous impact, Houseman says.

“Janet has been amazing since the moment I met

her,” Houseman says. “During the last day of a showing of *The Wizard of Oz*, I came and watched over the tasks she had to complete during and after the show. I was able to ask questions, interact with the tech crew and even get to know how the Civic Center uses outside help to create a show.”

The two continue to keep in touch today, as Houseman works as a conference planning and management intern at Iowa State University. “Janet is always available to correspond with me via email, text or phone call,” she says. “I am always very excited to send her an update on my education and work experience.”

Houseman says she knows “without a doubt” that she’s on the right career path now. “Without my experiences with DMPA, I’m sure I would be one of the lost college students out there who just can’t find their dream,” she says. “I look up to not just Janet, but to every individual that I have encountered with DMPA. I am honored and blessed to have this community of people who are eager to help me pursue my dreams.” ■

TEACHER HONORED AS DMPA'S 10 MILLIONTH GUEST

The recognition involves a \$10,000 gift that will enable elementary school students to experience the arts.

Something historic happened during the Civic Center's October run of *Something Rotten!* An audience member at the 2017-2018 Willis Broadway Series' season-opening performance unknowingly became Des Moines Performing Arts' 10 millionth guest.

Ten million guests. That's almost *three times* the entire population of Iowa. It's almost *10 times* the number of corn dog-munching Iowa State Fairgoers in 2017.

To determine the time frame for the anticipated milestone, DMPA used attendance and ticket-sales data gathered since the 1979 opening of the Des Moines Civic Center. The 10 million figure includes guests at the Civic Center as well as Stoner and Temple theaters.

"This number represents the passion Iowans have for theater, dance and all of the performing arts," says DMPA President and CEO Jeff Chelesvig. "We were delighted to celebrate the milestone and share our appreciation with the millions of patrons who got us to this point."

DMPA officials say Iowans from all 99 counties have attended DMPA engagements, and nearly 4 million guests have attended a Willis Broadway Series performance, generating a local economic impact of approximately \$30 million annually.

HONORING A SYMBOLIC GUEST

Because education is a critical component of its mission, DMPA is proud that almost 600,000 of its 10 million guests have been students and educators attending Applause Series matinee performances. Geared specifically toward kids, these productions

Surprise! Before the season-opening performance of *Something Rotten!*, teacher Donna Britt exudes excitement when Des Moines Performing Arts President and CEO Jeff Chelesvig honors her as DMPA's 10 millionth guest. Chelesvig presented her with a \$10,000 gift that was made in her name to Jackson Elementary School, where Britt has taught for many years.



38 CELEBRATION

focus on popular children's books or topics ranging from science and music to social studies and issues such as bullying. Tickets are priced at \$1 each to enable all students a chance to experience attending a theatrical performance.

When DMPA leaders considered how to celebrate the 10 millionth guest, they devised a plan to highlight DMPA's educational programs rather than honor a random patron, notes Eric Olmscheid, DMPA's director of programming and education.

So DMPA officials chose Des Moines Public Schools teacher Donna Britt as the "honorary" 10 millionth guest. Britt has worked 42 years as an elementary school teacher and has been responsible for more than 5,000 students attending Applause Series productions in the past decade.

But it's not easy to fool a teacher, and Britt suspected that something mysterious was going on when DMPA invited her to attend *Something Rotten!* on the new season's opening night. Still, she was surprised when, moments before the show began, Chelesvig accompanied her onto the Civic Center stage and announced that Britt not only was the honorary 10 millionth guest but also that a \$10,000 gift would be made in her name to Jackson Elementary School, where she taught for many years and is now a substitute teacher.

"It's a great way to celebrate you and what you've done for Des Moines Performing Arts," Chelesvig told her in front of a full house.

"When he said \$10,000, I thought I was going to fall off the stage," Britt says. "I was totally astounded."

The \$10,000, all of which was donated by DMPA board members, will be put to good use at Jackson Elementary School, Britt says. Plans are for the gift to finance future trips to Applause Series shows, as well as underwrite teaching artists in the school and purchase instruments for the school's music program.

'ALL ABOUT THE KIDS'


Receiving that donation was far better than being showered with balloons and confetti, Britt says. "It's not about me; it's all about the children," she adds. "That's why I'm still teaching. I've always booked trips so that every child in the school gets a chance to go to the Civic Center. We can teach children to read and write, but these shows tie everything together so they see how it all applies."

Britt recalls how excited students were after an Applause Series show filled with science experiments correlated with what they were learning in class. And after a show featuring Japanese taiko drummers, students were using anything handy to create their own musical instruments.

"They were learning how to count and keep rhythm, which are math skills," she says.

Although she's officially the honorary 10 millionth guest, Britt says she is grateful to DMPA's other 9,999,999 audience members.

"I'm just a facilitator who set things up so kids could go to the Civic Center," she says. "Without the support of Des Moines Performing Arts patrons, none of this would be possible." ■



Eager students line up at
the Des Moines Civic Center
in anticipation of
experiencing an Applause
Series production.

“WE CAN TEACH
CHILDREN TO
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BUT THESE
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THEY SEE HOW IT
ALL APPLIES.”

Donna Britt

40 BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND STAFF

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DesMoinesPerformingArts.org

A photograph showing the silhouettes of four students standing in a row, looking towards the right. They are in a dark space, likely backstage, with bright stage lights visible in the background, creating a strong backlight effect and lens flare.

The Iowa High School Musical
Theater Awards Showcase (*pictured
on the cover*) features excerpts from
high schools' musical productions.
Here, students gather backstage
before their Showcase performance.