Mounds Theatre: A Community Mainstay

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Where can you regularly see family-friendly wrestling, local comedians, burlesque shows, a psychobilly concert, live radio shows and “A Klingon Christmas Carol”? The Mounds Theatre in the heart of Dayton’s Bluff, that’s where.

Executive director Jessica Johnson often hears the comment “I didn’t even know this was here!” The theater is at 1029 Hudson Road in Saint Paul, a location that makes it difficult for people to stumble across. Once they find it however, people tend to come back.

Many performers have been involved with a variety of productions over the years. Johnson herself was involved as a performer, tech crew member and, later, the producer of burlesque shows for several years before becoming the executive director in 2014.

“It’s really is a special place, with a great art deco vibe and loads of potential. Having the flexibility to put on productions with both niche and wide range of appeal from Terry Pratchett’s ‘Discworld’ to ‘Night of the Living Dead’ to assorted radio theater productions,” said Sal Cloak, a member of the Conundrum Radio Collective, which has been working with the Mounds Theatre since 2007.

The old-school vibe is authentic. According to Johnson, the theater was “built the year Vaudeville died” in 1922. Though the theater was used as a movie house and live entertainment venue for several decades, by 1967 it was simply a warehouse space. But in 2001, an ambitious renovation project began. Spearheaded by Raeann Ruth and her nonprofit Portage for Youth, the Mounds returned to its roots as a theater. In the remodel, Ruth incorporated numerous original items such as the medallions for the chairs. She also acquired period pieces to add to the decor. The paneling in the lobby, for instance, was once part of an old Maplewood movie theater.

Authentic relics from a bygone era, including a still-operating 35mm movie projector, enhance the theater’s mystique. However, finding a qualified projectionist is a challenge, Johnson said.

The theater reopened in 2003 as a versatile venue. The standard rows of seats for theatrical performances and concerts can be removed when the wrestling ring needs to be installed in the middle of the floor. Tables can also be arranged on the floor for cabaret-style performances and comedy shows. When Conundrum performed “Night of the Living Dead,” the entire theater became the stage.

“You can literally do anything,” Johnson said.

The slew of eclectic performances have put the Mounds on the map for small production companies and their various niche audiences. “We want to do experimental work that no one comes to,” Johnson said. “That’s the point.”

Obviously an audience is desirable, but Johnson works with small companies that are just getting started and need experience. This means short, two-weekend runs for independent performances. Not only does this serve the artistic community, it frees up the space for regular events during the week.

Haunted tours have introduced many amateur ghost hunters to the theater each fall. The space is also rented out for weddings, fund-raisers and concerts. Events like wrestling draw families from Dayton’s Bluff.

Johnson also wants to bolster daytime programming. In particular, she believes activities for children can foster the next generation of artists. Johnson would like to increase bookings like The KEYS Project, a summer camp which teaches theater to elementary school children.

Of the original work performed at Mounds Theatre, “I Heart Brains,” a musical about zombies, was one of the biggest draws. The performance troupe consisted of a rotating group of high school students and graduates, led by their former high school theater teacher. The large audience was due in part to one performer’s mom, who brought all of her 18 siblings to the show.

“It’s community theater,” Johnson said. “When you know someone, you go.”

The Mounds has a theater liquor license, which means they may sell alcohol during performances. Along with wine and custom drinks like Soylent Tea or Fiery Doom, Johnson pours beer out of growlers straight from the East Side’s own Sidhe Brewery.

Yes, the executive director staffs the concession stand during shows.

Even with all the bells and whistles — the beer, the multimedia-ready equipment, the adaptable space — the theater’s allure still lies with the fundamentals.

“It’s an actual theater,” said Derek Dirlam, one of the group’s directors. “There is a comfort in being able to perform on an actual stage in a building that was meant to be a theater.”

Photos:

File: Ed-Projector.jpg

Credit: Ed Day

Caption: The Mound’s Theatre has a working 35 mm projector.

File: Ed-RadioFear.jpg

Credit: Ed Day

Caption: A flier for one of the theatre’s events, Radio Fear.