

The History of Adaire Theatre

Whenever there's a need for something, we figure out a way that we can meet that need using theatre as our tool— Kendall Payne

Adaire Theatre is a non-profit theatre company dedicated to providing affordable, high quality theatre to the Pulaski community. It was founded in 2012 by its current Producing Artistic Director Kendall Payne, who wanted to make a lasting impression on the community of Pulaski, or, as he puts it, “bring together organizations to make a better, more lasting impact on the community. They’re not just in that moment.”¹

The Birth of Adaire Theatre

Payne first fell in love with theatre, while attending middle school in Pulaski, when he watched a friend perform in a theatre production. Intrigued by the cool skateboard tricks his friend got to do, he asked how he could get involved in theatre and later performed in his first production: *James and the Giant Peach*. Even though he never got to do any cool skateboarding tricks, he fell in love with theatre and made it his lifelong career.

In the summer of 2012, Payne found himself back in his hometown of Pulaski without work after his contract to play a supporting lead in a movie got pulled due to funding issues. That’s when a friend of his, who was also struggling to find work at the time, suggested they just put on their own show. Starting a theatre company was something Payne had always wanted to do, but not until he was older and more settled down. Within a matter of weeks, however, he and his friend were able to find a space, hold auditions, navigate copyright, rehearse, and finally put on their first production: *Snoopy the Musical*, chosen for its small cast.

And that was how Adaire Theatre was born. When it first began, its members rehearsed and performed out of Pulaski County High School’s auditorium, and they put on only a single show each summer, while Payne took other work throughout the year. Adaire Theatre began its trajectory to where it is today when Keith McCoy, the current associate artistic director, entered the picture in the summer of 2013.²

¹ “Staff” (web page), Adaire Theatre, Accessed September 9th, 2020, <https://www.adairetheatre.org/staff>.

² Ibid.

McCoy got into theatre as a sophomore at Norfolk State University when he took an Introduction to Theatre course initially hoping to earn an easy A.³ Fortunately for him, the course ended up being far more influential than he first imagined. He was encouraged to try out for the school's production of *Oedipus*, which set him on the path to becoming more involved with his school's theatre program. After being enthralled with Ken Ard's performance in a Broadway production of *Smokey Joe's Cafe*, he decided to change his major to theatre.

In Spring 2013, Payne and McCoy met as roommates and cast members on the tour for *I Have A Dream*, a play about Martin Luther King Jr., and "hit it off instantly," as McCoy puts it. But McCoy noticed that Payne was always working on another project. So one day, McCoy finally asked what he was working on. Payne revealed he was working on a production of *High School Musical* for his own theatre company. McCoy offered to choreograph the show, and they spent the rest of the tour coming up with and recording steps.

The next summer, McCoy was asked to return to Adaire Theatre and choreograph its production of *Wizard of Oz*. Believing strongly in Adaire Theatre's mission, McCoy made the decision to stay with the company.

Adaire Theatre was McCoy's destiny: "I firmly believe things happen for a reason," He notes. "I felt like there was something greater that wanted us to meet."

McCoy's return could not have happened at a more opportune time. Payne had been shouldering most of the work involved with Adaire's productions and community efforts, so the arrival of a partner injected new energy into the theatre's efforts. Soon thereafter, in 2015, the theatre was able to start providing classes and summer camps and was eventually able to put on full seasons in 2019, about seven shows a year.

2018: A Year of Risks

After its production of *Jungle Book* in 2017, Adaire Theatre started offering weekend classes during the school year to provide year-round educational experiences to the community's youth. The classes averaged out to about six students, so one day Payne and McCoy started brainstorming about how they could reach more people.

As part of its mission, Adaire Theatre strives to serve the community by providing something for everyone. Payne and McCoy decided to take some risks and undertake

³ Ibid.

something completely new. Thus far, the theatre had presented primarily family-friendly shows, which meant that the area's adult population who didn't have kids or younger relatives might not be interested in or even aware of Adaire Theatre's productions. So in the summer of 2018, Adaire Theatre split its offerings into two programs: a *Mainstage Series*, consisting of experienced actors and designed to reach older audiences, and *Adaire Kids*, which would continue offering an educational experience to local youth.

To kick off its mainstage series in 2018, Payne and McCoy decided to stage a production completely different from what they had ever done before in order to really distinguish the two components of Adaire Theatre: the musical *Chicago*.



Action Shot from Adaire Theatre's production of *Chicago* by Bryant Altizer Photography

In 2018, Adaire Theatre also moved out of the high school auditorium and into downtown Pulaski, where it worked out of nontraditional spaces like the Elks Lodge in its production of *Chicago*.⁴ That move was monumental in serving the community by building a cultural hub right in the downtown area, which helps bring in more tourists and thus more businesses.

⁴ Moss Arts Center, "Adaire Theatre - In the Moment: Artists and their Work, YouTube, August 14th, 2020, video, 18:36, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuQJo_LMBdE.

Realizing how important word of mouth was to the people of Pulaski, Adaire Theatre also began asking audience members after every show to share their experience with friends and family members.

All of these moves proved successful. Payne and McCoy learned that the secret to gaining interest from the community is to keep performing shows. Now they can walk into town and hear feedback from the community excited for the next one. “They see that we’re investing in them,” McCoy notes, “so now they’re willing to invest in us.”

Giving Back to the Community

Despite the new directions 2018 brought, Adaire Theatre wanted to do more to give back to the community. So in 2019, Payne and McCoy began working on *Quiet Courage*, an original play about Chauncey Depew Harmon, a man who fought for equal teachers’ salaries and school facilities for black people right in Pulaski county.⁵

Quiet Courage initially started out as a way to keep people coming back to the Museum section of Calfee Training School, but it has expanded into a full-length show, a shorter, touring production to be performed in schools, and a version for classrooms to produce themselves.

Payne and McCoy plan on creating more original pieces for Adaire that will provide Pulaski County and regional residents with more knowledge of their history. Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has halted live performances, but the theatre’s leaders are planning a strong comeback. “This is a freight train right here,” McCoy says, “and it will not stop.”

⁵ “Chauncey Depew Harmon, Senior: a case study in leadership for educational opportunity and equality in Pulaski, Virginia,” Virginia Tech Library, Accessed September 20th, 2020, <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/40002>.