

A Century Onstage

Having hosted legends like Brando and Hepburn, Ivoryton Playhouse turns 100

By JESSICA GIANNONE

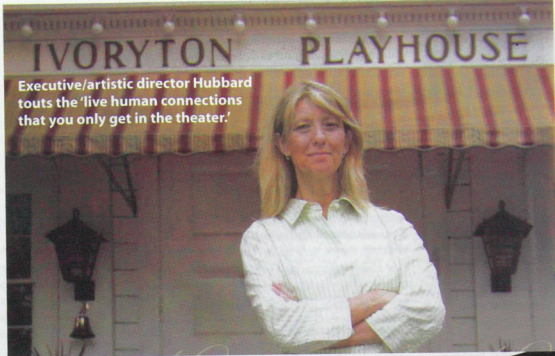
As the sun goes down, the stars come out — not just the ones beneath the moon, but the stars of the stage. In the quiet village of Essex, tucked away behind an old maple tree, across from a quaint café and a more than century-old library, stands another venerable structure: the Ivoryton Playhouse. Over its 100-year history, the small (280-seat) theater has hosted some of the world's most renowned actors, including Katharine Hepburn and Marlon Brando.

In addition to staging seven professional productions a year and additional community events, the playhouse is known for its history as the first self-sustaining summer theater in the nation. What originally was built as a recreation hall for Comstock, Cheney & Co. ivory factory employees in 1911 turned into an acclaimed theater that became the heart of the little community of Ivoryton — we can call it a true “Colonial America.”

Late producer and director Milton Stiefel was the first to mount theatrical productions at the playhouse in 1938, after Stiefel bought the building and turned it into a summer theater. The building currently hosts year-round performances for audiences of all ages and presents timeless musicals, comedies and other productions ranging from *The Buddy Holly Story* to *The Producers*.

Ivoryton Executive and Artistic Director Jacqueline Hubbard directs productions in what was once a shabby and dusty building that turned into a summer destination for hundreds of professional actors who come from New York, or right around the corner.

“The fact that we’re still here, it’s 2011 and we’re still here to celebrate,” says Hubbard. “That’s an accomplishment in itself.”



Executive/artistic director Hubbard touts the ‘live human connections that you only get in the theater.’

With the help of 12 staff members, more than 120 volunteers, donors — not to mention faithful audience members — the playhouse is still able to remain operating.

Visitors who first walk up the steps into the playhouse are greeted by a bust of Hepburn, who performed in seven productions at the theater in 1931, including *Just Married* and *The Man Who Came Back* (though Hepburn herself never came back, having moved on to Hollywood glory).

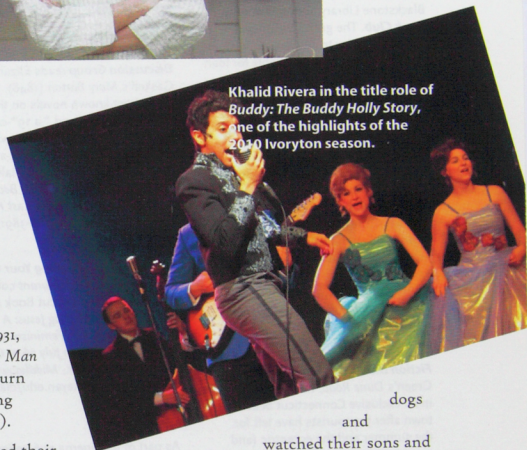
The playhouse family celebrated their 100-year anniversary at the end of May, remembering all the theater’s past performances and the actors who made up the soul of theater.

The celebration started with a May 20 performance that was a sneak preview of the Saturday night production and told the history of the playhouse through brief skits from past plays and vocal performances about the theater’s evolution over the decades. On Sunday locals gathered around the block for horse and buggy rides, to decorate cupcakes and watch performances on the town green with their children. Townspeople expressed gratitude at the weekend event in honor of the playhouse.

Miss Connecticut 2011, Regina Turner, who made an appearance at the theater’s Sunday event, expressed her reaction to the theater community.

“It’s a real homey feel,” said Turner. “All the people come together. You don’t see this anywhere else.”

Children stood in line with their parents and grandparents to wait for buggy rides as others reclined on blankets with their



Khalid Rivera in the title role of *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story*, one of the highlights of the 2010 Ivoryton season.

dogs and daughters frolic around the big gazebo on the green.

“The [theater] is such a part of Ivoryton,” explained Aggie Waterman, the owner of Aggie’s restaurant and the furniture shop Something Special across the street from the playhouse. “We don’t want to change the town. We want more people to come in so we can always keep the playhouse.”

As Waterman reflected on how the playhouse is “such an asset” to the community, she recalled how she met Stiefel and noted his dedication to the playhouse and how he transformed it into an enduring legend.

Julia Crowell, owner of the Ivoryton Tavern and Café, says she always notices women coming in the theater with smiles on their faces. She attributes the theater’s success to the mindset of the staff, aware of the history of the town.

“The playhouse is the heartbeat of Ivoryton, best neighbors that anyone can have,” says Crowell.

Continued on 45

A Century

Continued from 33

Hubbard says the Ivoryton Playhouse Foundation, which was founded in 1978, works to sustain the theater financially in an era of exploding entertainment options. She notes how the world has changed since the theater first opened, with movies, computers, TV and so many other distractions.

"For me personally, it's more important to keep theater going because so much of our lives now are 'virtual,'" Hubbard expresses. "So much of what we do and how we relate to each other is not live. I think the most important thing is the live human connections that you only get in the theater."

The theater's office manager, Diane Miezjeski, explains that the playhouse has an intimate feel due to its size, and audience members are not far from the action. She explains how the theater really hasn't been changed a lot over the decades.

"We're not big and glitzy," Miezjeski says, "but you never know who's on our stage now will become famous at some point."

In recent years the building has undergone several improvements, including a new HVAC system, shingles, seats and sound and lighting systems. The stage has had new decking and flooring added, but still remains at the original height.

Bobbie Hardgrove, who has lived in Essex for 45 years, says the playhouse looks so much better than when she first attended performances there as a kid. She says the playhouse has brought more life back to the town.

The theater is quite an economic driver for the

town, as the people who see the shows will have a bite at the café or stay at the Ivoryton Inn.

"It's the reason people come here," says Hubbard. "I think regardless of the economy theater has a place. It has a place to lift you up when times are hard, and when times are good it's a time to celebrate. We'll still be here."

Locals say what makes the theater special isn't just its size, location or history, but the ghosts of actors left behind who still lurk the tiny halls and dressing rooms.

Hubbard says her staff is convinced there's a ghost inhabiting the premises. No one has yet gotten a good look at her (they think it's a female, who may be clad in darkish garb), but some have sensed her running down the hall or heard her footsteps on the stage.

"She's probably the reason it is still here," jokes Hubbard.

Hubbard says the theater's endurance comes down to thinking ahead and choosing the right plays to produce.

"When you come to the playhouse," says Hubbard, "you're part of that. It's the difference between watching and being part of it."

The Ivoryton season runs from March to November. Monday-night cabarets and a Christmas "spectacular" are among the off-season productions.

Aside from maintaining the building and paying the bills, Hubbard says the challenge is finding shows that people want to come and see: "I think if we can do those things, we'll be good for another 100 years."



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