A New Season, Changed Status

By Jennifer Poiry-Prough

A small renaissance is taking place at Warsaw, Indiana’s legendary Wagon Wheel Theatre, spurred on by its recent transition from a for-profit professional theatre to a non-profit professional theatre. It is a time of innovation and community involvement perhaps unlike any other in the institution’s illustrious 56-year history.

No longer does the former Ramada Inn, now a Wyndham Garden Hotel, the Wagon Wheel has maintained a good relationship with the facility. The hotel advertises Wagon Wheel productions on its electronic marquee, and the theatre draws out-of-town visitors, who often stay overnight at the hotel.

Artistic Director Scott Michaels says the change to not-for-profit from for-profit was the best way to secure longevity in today’s economy. “We weren’t struggling” he says, “but we were barely breaking even, and we had to look at how the theatre would survive after [owner Bruce Shaffner] eventually retires. We want it to be around a hundred years from now for the community to enjoy.”

Director of Operations Will Dawson explains that the theatre’s non-profit status allows it to obtain grants and 501(c)3 tax-deductible donations. “For the long-term health of the theatre,” he says, “it made a lot of sense.”

Both Dawson and Michaels agree that the change to non-profit status has brought a few challenges but no real disadvantages. “In the past, if we needed money, we could always just take out loans,” says Michaels, “but now we’re fully supported by the community and by corporate donations.”

In fact, the Warsaw community has provided a lot of support in just a few short months. Michaels says that The Directors Club, a group of around 200 individuals who support the theatre financially and help choose the season line-ups, supports the non-profit status 100 percent.

However, Dawson says, this change will not affect the high quality the theatre’s audiences have come to expect. “The Wagon Wheel will still be a professional theatre,” he says. “In fact, the Wagon Wheel is in a unique location with the regional theatres across the country are not-for-profit. We’re known for our tremendous production value, so [the quality of the productions] won’t change. With Scott here full-time, it can only become better.”

Even residing in a small community such as Warsaw, the Wagon Wheel’s reputation draws enormous talent from auditions in Chicago and New York as well as prestigious performing arts schools. “We are the only professional summer stock theatre, not just in Northeast Indiana, but in a wide area,” says Dawson. “The talent level is sky high. Most, if not all of these actors, plan on making a career in the business. We have dozens of actors currently in Broadway productions or on national tours.”

Longtime patrons should be aware that the theatre isn’t planning on changing its formula for success in terms of types of productions offered throughout the season. The 2012 summer season has the familiar mix of kid-friendly entertainment, grownups-only shows, old and new favorites, a non-musical comedy and a musical revue.

Opening the season is the family favorite musical Peter Pan, running June 6-16.

“This was an easy choice as a kids-of-all-ages type of show,” says Dawson. “So many kid-friendly musicals are geared toward girls – Beauty and the Beast, Annie – but last year’s season opener, Disney’s Tarzan, this is a musical that appeals to boys as well. So that brings in a whole new audience.”

Although the role of the boy who won’t grow up is traditionally played by a woman, the Wagon Wheel’s Peter Pan will be played by a boy. “He’s great,” says Dawson. “Plus he can hit all the high notes.”

Dawson is especially excited to produce this show in the round. “The actors are flying through the aisles almost as if they’re flying over the audience’s heads,” he says. “The audience always feels a part of the show at the Wagon Wheel, but this will be special.”

Based on the 2001 Reese Witherspoon movie, Legally Blonde (June 20-30) features one of the largest casts of the season. In the story, effervescent sorority girl Elle戈es to Harvard Law School to win back her ex and learns the lesson that staying true to yourself never goes out of style.

The original Broadway production in 2007 featured Wagon Wheel alum and former Miss America Kate Shindle as Elle’s nemesis Vivienne.

Next up is Rodgers & Hammerstein’s 1945 musical, Carousel (July 4-14), with guest director and Wagon Wheel alum Tony Humrichouser who recently directed Eddie Falco in a New York City cabaret show. Although it’s not as bright and cheery as many Rodgers & Hammerstein musicals, such as Oklahoma! or State Fair, it was the composers’ favorite of their collaborations. “It’s a story about domestic abuse, a topic no other musicals were tackling [in the 1940s],” Dawson explains. “That’s probably why they loved it so much. It pushed the limits for its time.”

Nevertheless, Dawson says, it may be a bit too dark for younger audiences.

Another musical for the grownups is Kander & Ebb’s Chicago (July 18-28). Dawson says he is most excited about this production. “I’m really anxious to see the reaction to the dance numbers,” he says. “With the audience practically onstage, it’ll get pretty in-your-face.”

However, due to adult themes and suggestive language, Dawson says this show should be considered R-rated.

A bit more tame is Blithe Spirit (August 1-11), a comedy based on the 1945 film about an author whose dead ex-wife is conjured by an eccentric medium and then haunts him and his new wife. Angela Lansbury starred in the 2009 Broadway adaptation, and Wagon Wheel audiences will be happy to learn that Ann Whitney will be leading the cast in this production. The sister of “M*A*S*H” Maclean Stevenson, Whitney has been featured in films, such as Home Alone (as the drugstore clerk) and Sandra Bullock’s While You Were Sleeping.

“She’s a big name around here,” says Dawson, “and it’s been a long time since we’ve had her back here.”

The season wraps up with the Irving Berlin musical revue I Love a Piano (August 15-25). “Berlin wrote hundreds of hit songs over the decades, such as Puttin’ on the Ritz,” ‘There’s No Business Like Show Business’ and ‘God Bless America,’” says Dawson. “Jerome Kern said [of Berlin], ‘He has no place in American music. He is American music.’”

Although the high caliber of talent and spectacle will remain the same, there are some exciting changes in store for the theatre. Rather than just a summer season with a holiday show in December, the Wagon Wheel will now be open year-round. It will also include a “Wagon Wheel Junior” program for area kids to participate in shows. Two productions have already taken place, and one more is planned for October.

“We wanted to give back to the community,” Dawson explains. “Statistics show that kids who are involved in arts education have higher GPAs and standardized test scores, and they gain confidence in many other areas.”

In just a few months, says Michaels, “the Junior programs have had huge support in terms of sponsorships and attendance.”

Over the past seven years, the Wagon Wheel has held summer camps for kids through grade 12 in which a trained staff of theatre professionals teach the kids a show over the course of a week or two, and then they perform for an audience. “We have always had an auditions list of 20 or 30 kids,” says Dawson, “but with the new program we can get more kids involved. More kids means more parents and volunteers and more people in the building who may have otherwise never come. It also exposes a new audience to theatre. It’s win-win for us.”

In addition, the theatre “will become a facility for the arts,” says Michaels. This will include dance and acting classes, voice and piano lessons, exhibits by area artists and even the hiring of local chamber musicians and symphonies to play for some productions and dance performances. Fundraisers are underway to grow this project.

Furthermore, although just in the exploration stages now, Dawson and Michaels hope to eventually produce a show featuring all local amateur talent. “We believe there are many in our community who would love the opportunity to perform on this stage like the professionals,” says Dawson, “and we feel the stage is big enough.”

However, Michaels wants to give the community some time to get used to the initial changes in the theatre’s identity first. “We’re nationally known as one of the best professional regional theaters,” he says. “We don’t want to confuse the patrons just yet. We don’t want them wondering, ‘Wait, are they a community theatre now? Or still a professional theatre?’

Because most amateur actors have 5 to 5 jobs, community theatre productions usually take six to eight weeks to rehearse. That, coupled with the Wagon Wheel’s increasingly busy schedule with year-round productions, special events and classes, Michaels says it would be hard to find the time to rehearse a community production at night.

However, they are considering selecting a “junior” version of a popular show and inviting adults to audition. These shorter pieces could be performed for younger audiences and would require less rehearsal time. But as the Wagon Wheel continues to grow, with community support, Michaels hopes they will be able to hire additional staff to make community theatre productions possible in the foreseeable future.

“There’s been a great response to the Junior shows and great community pride,” says Michaels. “People come up to me in the store all the time and tell me how excited they are about all the things we’ve got going on. This is such a great community and I am so thankful for their continued support of the arts.”