

A Theatrical Revival in Huntington

By Jen Poiry-Prough

Northern Indiana has another professional theater. Located in downtown Huntington, Different Stages Theater will open its doors to the public on July 8, with its inaugural production of *The Sound of Music*.

Founded by Executive Director Rich Najuch and Artistic Director Joel Froomkin, its home will be the historic New Huntington Theater.

Built in 1904 as a vaudeville house, the New Huntington Theater's 400-seat house couldn't keep up with the demand.

"Huntington was a railroad crossover town then," says Najuch. Travelers craved entertainment, so the 1,400-seat New Huntington Theater was built.

In 1940 the theater was converted to a movie palace and remained one for almost 60 years when it was closed down by the arrival of a new multiplex in Huntington. The building changed hands several more times until 2007 when Najuch and Froomkin purchased it with the dream of bringing it back to its live theater glory.

They had been living and working in New York at the time (Froomkin as a director and Najuch in production) but wanted more artistic control and to create something they could call their own.

"We spent about three years looking all over the country at buildings," says Najuch, "and came to Huntington in February of 2007. After exploring the area, we felt that this would be a fantastic place for our company. We loved the building, and it had a great location – just 20 minutes south of Fort Wayne."

They immediately began renovation on the lobby space and then on the larger auditorium space, using their own funds and the help of family and friends.

Community interest in the renovation was so great that they began pressing Najuch and Froomkin to put on a show, despite the fact that the auditorium wasn't ready.

"We feel strongly that community involvement in promoting the arts for all is a top priority for the success of the theater," says Najuch. So they came up with a short-term fix: The Supper Club.

This cabaret-style series was written by Froomkin and consisted of three or four professional singers from New York. Froomkin built the show around the talents of the singers for each production in the series. "Audiences really loved the quality of the singers and the format of the show," says Najuch. "Joel researched each song and wrote a script telling stories about the original artists and the history of the songs."

Audience feedback for the intimate show was beyond their expectations and fueled their fire to continue working on the larger space.

Finally, seven years later, they are working on their first full-scale Broadway style musical, *The Sound of Music*.

Froomkin and Najuch held auditions in New York this February and March. They also saw applicants online via Skype (because it's 2014). "We saw thousands of applicants," says Najuch, "[including] over 400 for the role of Maria alone."

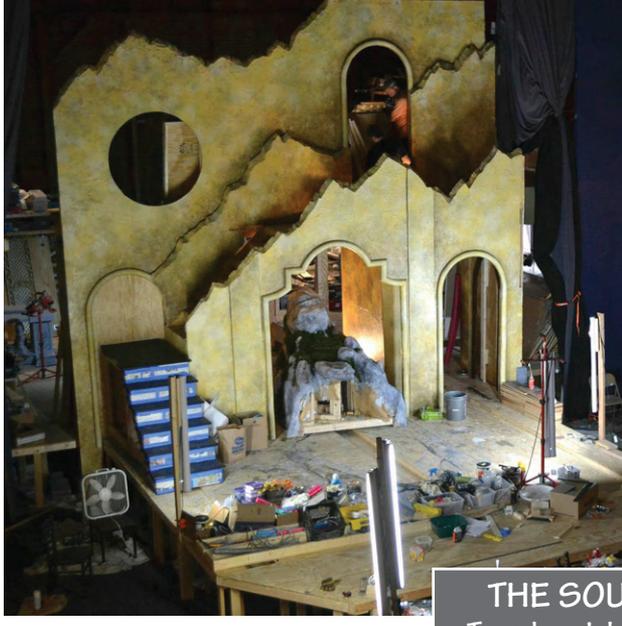
They auditioned local children in April for the Von Trapp kids, but the rest of the cast is comprised of professional full-time actors.

Najuch can't help but rave over their cast. "We have six

fantastically talented young local performers for the children's roles," he says. "Our Maria, Lauren Lukacek, is fresh off the international tour of *My Fair Lady* where she went on as Eliza Doolittle, and our Captain, Robert Teasdale, is just off the *Shrek* national tour. One of our Supper Club favorites, Rebecca Rosky, will return to play the Mother Abbess."

Audition videos of the leads can be viewed at www.different-stages.com.

The Sound of Music runs July 8 to 27. Their next production, the play *Moonlight and Magnolias*, will run August 14-23. It was cast this spring as well. The next two shows, *The Full Monty* (November 11-22)



New Huntington Theater;
Inset: Circa 1940

THE SOUND OF MUSIC
Tuesday, July 8-Sunday, July 27
Different Stages
at New Huntington Theater
528 N. Jefferson St., Huntington
Tix: \$ 29-\$ 75, 454-0603

and *The Supper Club Holiday Show* (December 4-20) will be cast in September when Najuch and Froomkin return to New York to hold auditions.

Although Different Stages Theater hires professional talent, they are giving roles to a few area performers they have worked with in the past. "Our chorus of nuns is made up of students from Manchester University's vocal department where Joel is a teacher," says Najuch.

Najuch is particularly proud of Different Stage's three-quarter thrust space and innovative set design by Froomkin. "Because we don't have a traditional theater set up yet for flying scenery," he says, "all of the scenery must move forward and backward – and there is a ton of it. Joel's set is lavish, full, and innovative in its execution. The space seats 310 guests on three sides, and no one is more than 10 rows from the stage. It is a very intimate space."

The production will use projections "to paint a cinematic picture of the various locations for the show," says Najuch. "It really is going to be different than what has been seen in the area."

In fact, this innovative way of creating theater is what led to the theater's name.

"Every time someone asks us about our theater," says Najuch, "[whether it's] potential patrons, potential performers, anyone, the word that kept coming up was 'different.' It's different from other places. It's different from what peo-

ple expect when they come to see a show or when they come to work on a show. We finally decided that it was really our calling card. We are just different!"

One thing that makes them different from professional "stock" theaters, in which performers rehearse one show while performing another, is their rehearsal schedule.

"We have both worked in stock theaters before," says Najuch, "and have found that we don't have the time to do the work the way we want to. We decided to create a non-stock theater. Our shows get more preparation time, almost double the rehearsal time, and we don't learn another show while one show is performing. This allows us and the performers to focus on details that we

just aren't able to when focusing on two shows at once."

Their performers have found this approach unique but welcome. "They have all been surprised by the number of rehearsal hours and days we have," says Najuch.

Different Stages is also smaller and more intimate than many other venues. "With half of the seats of some of the other area theaters," says Najuch, "our audience will be more intimately introduced to the show and the performers. This is something that people responded to very well with our smaller Supper Club series."

Although the theater does not have an attached restaurant, they have partnered with The Rusty Dog Irish Pub which has created a pre-theater price fixed menu so patrons can have dinner and still be assured they will make it to the show on time.

From the moment they arrived in Huntington seven years ago, Najuch and Froomkin have integrated themselves tightly into the community. They have been involved with charity talent shows and have served as board members for the Huntington County Visitor Center, Main Street Huntington and the Huntington Historical Board. They are also closely involved with the local arts council in Huntington, which helped found The Arts Initiative. "Their mission," says Najuch, "is to integrate the professional arts into the daily lives of the citizens of Huntington."

Their community ties and their love of theater have only strengthened throughout the years. The theater's blog, written by Froomkin, has a longstanding and loyal fan base. He started it in 2007 to keep their New York friends and families up to date on their Midwest adventure.

When Huntington theater lovers discovered the blog, they "demanded" even more frequent posts, Najuch jokes. And once again, Froomkin happily gave the community what they wanted.

"The main comment we get from patrons," says Najuch, "is that it is clear that we love what we do. They hear us telling people about the theater, they read the blog and they read the newsletter. They get the clear picture that we love passing on our enjoyment to the patrons. We love these shows, we live and breathe them, and we do everything we can to share and introduce that love to our guests."