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Cooperation Is No Act

Theatre Kalamazoo 'beneficial to all' stage companies

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Some of the members of the Theatre Kalamazoo collective. (See end of story for names).

With 12 theater organizations in Southwest Michigan, the stage might seem a bit crowded. But cooperation among these organizations ensures that there's ample room for everyone, from high school students with an eye on Hollywood to touring professionals at Miller Auditorium, and for many kinds of shows, from the works of ancient Greek playwrights to gay- and lesbian-themed productions.

The theater organizations are part of the collective Theatre Kalamazoo, a group that began meeting regularly in 1998 to coordinate schedules and marketing efforts to bring a wide variety of plays and musicals to Southwest Michigan.

"There's a sense of artistic spirit that is beneficial to all," says Ed Menta, professor of theater at Kalamazoo College and a member of Theatre Kalamazoo.

The theater programs at both Kalamazoo College and WMU are part of Theatre Kalamazoo, as are the Black Arts and Cultural Center, Center Stage Theatre, The Civic, South County Players, Farmers Alley Theatre, Fancy Pants Theater, The New Vic Theatre, Queer Theatre Kalamazoo, All Ears Theatre and Miller Auditorium.

Each theater company is still its own business with its own casts, crews and schedule of plays. The Theatre Kalamazoo group is there to help make sure there's an audience for each show.

"The (group) is a response to the question, 'How effective are email blasts?'" Menta says. "There's online ads, radio ads. We're always advertising in each other's programs."

In addition to cooperating with each other, the theater groups also collaborate on occasion. Theatre Kalamazoo, for example, sponsors its own signature event: the annual New Play Festival. The festival, which began in 2011, is a showcase for aspiring and professional writers who submit short plays for consideration. The plays selected are produced by the member theaters, with the Gilmore Foundation providing a small cash reward for the winning writers.

The variety and number of theaters operating in the Kalamazoo area is unusual for the Midwest, Menta says. In some cases, their names alone, such as Queer Theatre Kalamazoo and the Black Arts and Cultural Center, indicate the nature of the group. All Ears Theatre creates live radio shows, often using scripts first produced in the 1930s and 1940s.

Fancy Pants looks for new playwrights and “under-produced classics,” like the stage version of *Night of the Living Dead* scheduled for this October, says Carol Zombro, executive director of Fancy Pants. “We’ll take anybody — if you want to see some weird plays, come see us,” Zombro says.

Fancy Pants Theater started in 2010, after Kalamazoo’s Whole Art Theater closed. Since 2013, Fancy Pants has been run out of an RV that delivers actors for Shakespeare readings in Kalamazoo parks, among other shows. Fancy Pants staff members are looking for a permanent home for the group. Now the group presents three to four productions a year, on stages belonging to other companies.

“We attract the late-night crowd,” Zombro says. “If I’m making a big announcement, I don’t dare do it on Facebook before 10 p.m.”

This spring Fancy Pants hosted three festivals of short plays, each on a social issue: *#eracism* (inspired by the Trayvon Martin shooting), *Ladyfest* (addressing feminism) and *Gayla* (addressing gays and lesbians).

“We’re not afraid to put a play on and talk about it afterward,” Zombro says. “We want to make sure new plays get out there.”

Fancy Pants Theater co-hosted *Ladyfest* and *Gayla* with Queer Theatre Kalamazoo, which was in its second season. QTK presents its shows at Fire Historical & Cultural Arts Collaborative, on Portage Road, and QTK founder Laura Henderson says the group is focused on gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people and straight allies. She calls the group’s plays, like *The Gayvengers vs. The Ex-Men and Bare the Musical*, “equality entertainment.”

“We see performance as a catalyst for change,” Henderson says. “Anyone who’s exploring their sexuality can go to a safe place. We hope to create an opportunity for free expression.”

Henderson says audiences come to see people like themselves, although the group’s productions have plenty of audience members and actors who are straight. She says it’s equally important that the plays represent everyone. QTK offers shows written for and about gay men, but it also has offered *eLLe Kalamazoo*, inspired by the lesbian-focused *L Word* TV show, and *I Ain’t Afraid of No Xenu*, about the Church of Scientology.

Despite Theatre Kalamazoo's far reach, there are still a few groups, specifically minority groups, not represented, Menta says. There was a Latino theater group called New Latino Visions for a while, but it is now defunct. There's no Asian theater company either.

The Black Arts and Cultural Center, which has been in the Epic Center on the Kalamazoo Mall since 2001, is concentrating on theater this year by launching its Face Off Theater Company. The company debuted in July with a production of August Wilson's *Been Lovin' You*.

BACC Executive Director Yolonda Lavender says the Face Off Theatre Company will help BACC offer a more consistent lineup of shows about once a month, allowing it to stay competitive with other live theater companies in the area.

"(We are) the face of black theater in Kalamazoo, and maybe in Southwest Michigan," Lavender says. "In the community we're in, theater is a large component. We need to be more intentional about how we advertise (ourselves)."

Cutline for photo: *Some of the members of Theatre Kalamazoo and the entities they represent are, top row, from left: Nikki Dobos, Fancy Pants Theater; Todd Espeland, Kalamazoo Civic Theatre; Carol Zombro, Fancy Pants Theater; Laura Livingstone-McNelis, Festival Playhouse at Kalamazoo College; and Emily Duguay, WMU Department of Theatre. Bottom row, from left: Kevin Dodd, New Play Festival; Janet Gover, Civic Theatre; Laura K. Henderson, Queer Theatre Kalamazoo; Chandra Katrinic-Hoss, Center Stage Theatre; and Adam Weiner, Farmers Alley Theatre.*

Tags:

Theater companies New Play Festival Southwest Michigan Theatre Kalamazoo Ed Menta

Kalamazoo College Western Michigan University Theatre Black Arts and Cultural Center

Center Stage Theatre The Civic South County Players Farmers Alley Theatre Fancy Pants Theater

The New Vic Theatre Queer Theatre Kalamazoo All Ears Theatre Miller Auditorium Carol Zombro

Kalamazoo's Whole Art Theater Fire Historical & Cultural Arts Collaborative Laura Henderson

Epic Center Face Off Theater Company Yolonda Lavender

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