



Kamsack Playhouse

The Kamsack Playhouse began in 1988 with two dreams. One was to create a space for the performing arts, and the other was to show movies again, a tradition started in 1913 and ended in 1984. When the group of seven dreamers—Claire Bishop, Jeff Hilderman, Colleen Martin, Myrna Dey, Norwin Hallwas, Verla Kostick, and Iain McLean—heard the old Capitol Theatre was to be sold at a judicial auction in July, they formed a non-profit organization and collected enough donations from groups and individuals to purchase the building for \$1 more than the \$6,000 reserve bid.

After that the community came on board. The committee grew, the Town forgave back taxes, the Saan store donated ten per cent of a week's sales, and a crew of 30 men, women, and children showed up to scrub the floor and dusty seats, and to separate garbage from museum memorabilia, such as old posters, reels, and catalogues dating back as far as 1948, the year the theatre was built by Bill and Fred Welykholowa. After repairs to pipes and filling in a big hole in the floor of the men's washroom, the first movie, a double feature, was shown to a full house at Hallowe'en. Hilderman and McLean learned on the job to contend with torn reels and carbon rods in the two 40-year-old chrome and steel behemoth projectors, while the rest of the committee sold tickets and snacks in the lobby in costume.

But the fundraising had just begun. Over the next year the committee raised \$10,000 through an art auction, a flea market, a dinner theatre put on by the Kamsack Players, and a profitable sale of t-shirts with a logo of performing crows designed by Sandra Cuervo and still used in Playhouse publicity. More donations were made and a heritage grant procured to restore the old building. By the fall of 1989 the auditorium had been repainted in its original orange, brown, and beige art deco style. The neon on the marquee was repaired, a second-hand furnace put in, the old screen replaced with one that could be taken down for live performances, and most important, a stage was built. To make room for the stage, measuring 30 feet deep by the full 30 feet width of the building, 130 of the theatre's orange vinyl seats were removed, leaving a capacity of 220. This also allowed for an enlarged foyer at the back with a partition that serves as a backdrop for posters or wine and cheese tables.

In November 1989 the new stage was inaugurated with a Benefit performance, the brainchild of Colleen Martin, who had come from Ontario to Kamsack as a dance teacher. She invited three friends from her Toronto musical theatre background to donate a week of their time and talents in mounting a revue with her in exchange for billets and meals. The first half of the program presented local performers—school band, Harmony Glee Club, community choir, a 50s combo, and a number from Cats by the Dance Association. The homegrown and professional offerings promised future intentions of the Playhouse.

Succeeding Claire Bishop as president of the committee, Dave Clark brought his many skills to the rigorous job of coordinating the next phase of renovations with available finances,



A Capitol achievement

Local effort gives Kamsack a playhouse



faithfully recorded by Treasurer Evelyn Banks. Because of a deteriorating floor, the lobby had to be completely gutted; the new layout reflected as much as possible the postwar style with a curved concession, stuccoed walls and ceiling linked by a smooth curved border. The large pastoral mural painted by a former resident named Turnbull on acoustic tile on the inner wall of the auditorium was also preserved. Upstairs the 'crying room' adjoining the projection room made for a convenient office and control booth for sound and lights.

The opening Benefit had whetted a taste for high calibre musical theatre both in the community and in the creative powers of Martin. Over the next ten years she staged seven Galas, attracting both new professionals and Playhouse veterans to the shows. Schedules were detailed months in advance by phone and discussed for the first time in person on the ride back to Kamsack from the Regina airport, with a stop in Yorkton to make a sound tape with Gloria Herauf, who would later provide live piano accompaniment for each show. Gala week consisted of intense rehearsals, culminating in three performances on the weekend. Bringing collective experience from Stratford, Broadway, the Old Vic, Charlottetown and the

National Theatre in Ottawa, the entertainers were unanimous in praise of Kamsack's hospitality, and of the Playhouse itself. "It's a space people in Toronto would kill for," said singer/actor/writer Scott Hurst of Barrie, Ontario. "The acoustics are superb as is the freedom to work when you want."

Backstage, over these same years, more donations and a facilities grant permitted dressing rooms to be built, the projector to be replaced, and a lighting board and sound system installed. The first flurry of major renovations and fundraising was over and a playhouse was now available for dance recitals, school and local dramas, community concerts, and touring acts. The committee went through the usual ups and downs of finding volunteers and funding. Many founding members left town or became exhausted, and movie attendance was minimal. But the vision proved resilient and at every impasse, new people with fresh stamina and ideas appeared. Colleen Koroluk took over as president from Dave Clark, followed by Jane Smith, Nancy Brunt, Jen Foley, and since 2005, Jack Koreluik.

A new wave of life in the performing arts has recently come from the Kamsack Players. The group made a vibrant contribution to the establishment of the Playhouse in the late 80s-early 90s, but lost members and lay dormant for a decade. Three years ago a surge of motivation united new and seasoned actors, resulting in one or two productions a year to sold-out crowds. Clint Barrett is president of the troupe with a core membership of eight to ten, expanding to up to 20 people behind the scenes. In November 2007 they hosted Theatre One, a provincial drama competition where nine one-act plays were adjudicated in the Playhouse over three days. Last December they fed, entertained, and delighted over 300 patrons at a dinner theatre in the OCC Hall.

Thanks to such productions, continued tax breaks from the Town, and movie revenues, the Playhouse has survived for over 20 years. President Koreluik, also a key member of the Players, says: "Visiting actors all comment on how lucky we are to have this place with comfortable seats and a raked floor. Many perform to an audience on a flat surface in metal chairs."

Indeed we are lucky. The Kamsack Playhouse stands as a microcosm of the revitalization of our town. Besides being one of the improvements itself, it has undergone cycles of fallow periods, rebounding with productivity, thanks to an influx of new people adding energy and inspiration to those already here. May our 2010 Homecoming strengthen the Kamsack Renaissance.

Because Once Wasn't Enough!

