

editor's message



A Regional Theater for Bloomington — It's Time

About all I knew about Bloomington before I came here was that the chair-thrower Bobby Knight had coached the Hoosier basketball team. On my first visit in 2005, what impressed me, apart from the university, were the art galleries, the music clubs, and a poster I saw for a singer I liked who would be appearing at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. The town has culture, I thought. I could live here.

That same year a fellow New Yorker, named Randy White, also visited and was similarly impressed by the culture he found.

The arts make a difference. What the town has to offer, beyond Indiana University, can be a determining factor in the decision of a professor, administrator, corporate executive, teacher, entrepreneur, artist, restaurateur, or retiree to move here. Or a magazine editor or a theater director.

I bring this up now because Cardinal Stage Company, which Randy founded, is at a crossroads.

Cardinal is in its ninth year, has a budget of \$1.1 million, presents six productions yearly to 25,000 attendees, as well as plays for kids and a full-fledged education program that enables 10,000 children from low-income areas to see performances.

The quality of the productions is off-Broadway good, with actors from Indianapolis, Chicago, and New York often joining our best local talent. Last season's superb production of *Les Misérables* was Broadway caliber.

It's time. Cardinal Stage deserves a home.

Randy, his right-hand man, Mike Price, and his small staff work slavishly year-round — days, nights, weekends. Disassembling multiple complex sets at the rehearsal studio, loading them onto a truck late at night, unloading them at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater, putting them back together onstage and backstage, then taking them down and loading them onto the truck again and unloading at the end of the play's run is just one example of what it means for Cardinal not to have a home.

The work is a labor of love, but it can't be maintained forever. Many a staffer has left over the years, burned out. Other, less demanding, opportunities beckon.

Cardinal Stage has grown to become a professional regional theater by every measure, except one. It lacks an actual theater. And without that brick-and-mortar building, Cardinal cannot continue to keep or attract the best people, or to grow, or to gain the recognition that would draw theatergoers from beyond the Bloomington area.

The city has a lot at stake in keeping Cardinal here, vital, and growing. Currently, with its \$1.1 million budget and 25,000 attendees, Cardinal generates \$1.6 million in economic activity (including restaurants, hotels, etc.); the ripple effect adds 55 full-time jobs, and generates \$64,990 in local government revenue.

Beyond the price of the theater ticket, the average Bloomington attendee spends \$12.68 per event. Nonresident attendees spend an additional \$40.11. Approximately 70 percent of attendees are local and 30 percent are visitors.

If Cardinal's budget were increased to \$3 million and drew 50,000 attendees, the projected economic activity would be \$4 million, with 139 jobs created and \$157,892 in local government revenue.

To get to that point, Randy says Cardinal would need to construct or renovate a building of 25,000 square feet, with 250- and 120-seat auditoriums, a lobby, rehearsal space, a meeting room, offices, and shops. The price tag would be \$3–\$5 million.

Those of us who live here know what a great arts community this is. But to most of the world, Bloomington is all about basketball. An outstanding regional theater would solidify an additional identity and offer another reason for people to come to our town.

Cardinal has many supporters but no large corporation or wealthy donors to kick-start a capital fundraising campaign. Nor, at this point, is there the prospect of an old building that might become available for transformation.

If you love theater, naming rights — I'm sure — are on the table.

Malcolm Abrams
editor@magbloom.com