

Southern Living
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And the Show Goes On and On

Picture Broadway. Neon lights, sparkling marquees, and people lining sidewalks for extravagant shows. Everything bustles.

Now imagine Crossville. Ninety minutes north of Chattanooga, this sleepy city was voted one of America's best small towns in 1994. On the outskirts, golf courses and retirement resorts sprawl through woods thick with oaks and poplars.

So where's the connection to the big time? Last year, nearly 100,000 people came here to take in lavish productions such as *Camelot*, *the Tempest*, and *Oliver!* at the Cumberland County Playhouse.

"Most of our audiences drive at least an hour," say artistic director Abigail Crabtree. "So that puts us in competition with places such as Knoxville and Oakridge."

But competition doesn't really seem to be a problem. A combination of community and family ties ensures success. "Paul and I moved here in 1963," says Playhouse co-founder and Abigail's mother, Mary Crabtree. Her late husband, Paul, was a nationally acclaimed playwright and director when they returned with their seven kids to the hometown of Mary's mother.

At the locals' request, Paul wrote a play for Crossville's schoolchildren. It featured a cast of 100 little Tennesseans and was a roaring hit. The townspeople asked Paul and Mary to stay on. In 1965 the Playhouse opened.

"In the same way a kid might grow up in his parent's grocery store, ours were growing up here," Mary recalls. "They didn't just learn skills either; they grew up sharing a dream. And the feeling of communion was wonderful."

So wonderful, in fact, that two of the Crabtree brood run the Playhouse today. After working as an actress and director in New York and Los Angeles, Abigail now serves as artistic director. And down the hall, her brother Jim heads the place as its producing director.

A Yale graduate and one-time seminary student, Jim directs many of the shows and is pushing the theater into the next century. By expanding the facility and programming crowd-pleasing seasons, Jim maintains a winning formula. And neither he nor Abigail forgets their father's original commitment.

"I don't know of another theater in the east that combines the professional and community world as much as we do," says Abigail. "When we did *Oliver!* we used 65 kids and 60 adults from town. These people are the backbone and the joy here; *they* are the reason all of this was born. Mix their enthusiasm with a few professional actors, and you see how huge we are."

She's right. While untrained volunteers join with professionals in most casts, there isn't an amateur moment in the productions. With the elaborate sets, costumes, and melodic characters, each show transports viewers far from rural Tennessee.

"There are some kids from around here who would never have much of a live cultural experience if they didn't come to the theater," says actor Carol Irvin, who has played more than 85 roles since 1971. "I've had adults tell me after a show that their first

experience with theater was going to a Cumberland County school matinee. To have them in the audience as kids and later as adults – it’s great.”

Local ophthalmologist Larry Patterson agrees. And he says the theater can be an escape for him as well. “I have a normal life,” he says. “All day long I’m ‘Dr. Patterson,” but here I’m just ‘Larry.’ I love it and my patients love it too.”

This kind of support helps theater thrive, concurs visiting director Seth Reines. “I had known about the theater since it started,” Seth says. “A lot of my actor friends who had worked here all said it was a great place to be. What am I taking away from here?” Seth asks. “Well, I’ve got a wealth of stories, and I also feel like I’ve become part of the Crabtree family. Hopefully, I can come back.”

That’s a sentiment shared by every Cumberland County Playhouse visitor.



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