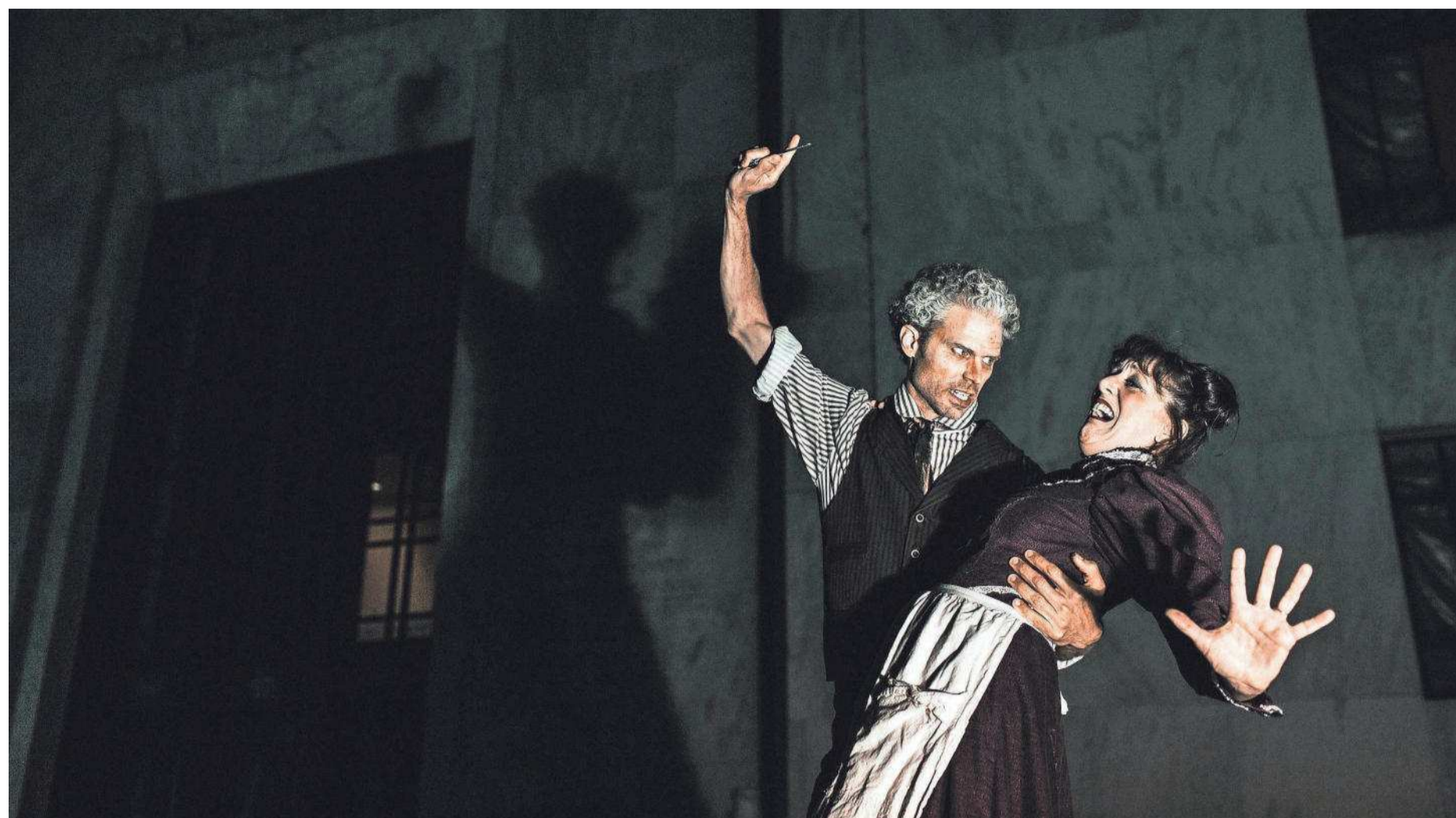


# Life in the Valley

## Mid-Valley theater is ‘thriving’



Enlightened Theatrics' production of "Sweeney Todd" ran from Oct. 10 through Nov. 4 in 2018.. COMMON ERA COLLECTIVE

### Salem Theatre Network boosts local, quality productions

**Abby Luschei**  
Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

People are talking about it — artists, musicians, business owners and actors, to name a few.

Downtown Salem isn't what it used to be, and many organizations are trying to battle the notion that there isn't anything to do in town. Including a nonprofit devoted to theater.

Something interesting happened from 2010 to 2013, said Jay Gipson-King, a part-time theater instructor at Chemeketa Community College and Willamette University. The Mid-Valley became home to eight new theater companies over three years.

What used to be one or two theater productions increased to five or six taking place on any given weekend, he said, and there needed to be a way for these organizations to communicate.

That's when the Salem Theatre Network was born.

The Salem Theatre Network is an alliance of 13 theater organizations in the Mid-Valley with a common goal: supporting each other and exposing the Mid-Valley to more theater.

Those in the network provide different theater experiences, boost each other's productions and work to bring educational opportunities to the area, like the Cherry Blossom Theatre Festival, taking place March 8-10.

With more than 20 companies in the Mid-Valley, the network is working together to prove that you don't need to leave the area for quality theater.

#### From competition to community

It was a slow build, but once the network got going, it took off.

After creating the Salem Theatre Network Facebook page in 2012, those in the group met a couple of times, Gipson-King said. It wasn't until theater companies in the area reached a "critical mass" that they decided to incorporate.

Since their 501(c)(3) status was approved in April of 2016, the network has met monthly for board meetings and figured out how they could intentionally work together as a collective rather than individuals.

"Arts have a limited audience and limited resources," Gipson-King said. "Instead of squabbling over our pieces of pie let's just make a bigger pie and then everybody gets more."

"If one company succeeds we all succeed ... that success helps everybody."

Each company used to tell their own story, said Lisa Joyce, executive director of Pentacle Theatre.

She said those at Pentacle, the oldest theater company in the region, believe more theater is better than less. David Ballantyne, a Pentacle volunteer and board member, came up with the slogan, "Community Not Competition."



The Cherry Blossom Theatre Festival will feature the One-Act Festival and workshops. It takes place March 8-10. LONNIE & KIM THURSTON

Opportunity for cross-promotion, service sharing and collaboration have come out of the network, like last summer when Keizer Homegrown Theatre and Aumsville Community Theatre worked together on "Shakespeare in the Park."

After a run at the Keizer Rotary Amphitheater, the production of "The Tempest" moved to Aumsville, said Ed Stiner, the box office manager at Aumsville Community Theatre.

And they plan to do it again this summer.

Stiner said another way the network supports one another is by getting the word out about updates or changes to shows, like when they had to cancel three productions of, "There Goes The Bride," unexpectedly.

With one actor injured, three not well enough to perform and impending winter weather, canceling the productions, which were supposed to take place Feb. 8-10, was inevitable.

The cancellations were announced on Facebook, and the Aumsville Community Theatre asked others to spread the word. The Salem Theatre Network, which has more than 1,600 followers, shared the post to relay the news to the community.

Working together in this way is the best thing to come out of the Salem Theatre Network, Vincenzo Meduri, founding artistic director of Enlightened Theatrics, said.

"We communicate, we talk about shows and our experiences and audience participation. It's a real conversation," he said.

"Right now? (Theater in Salem) is the best it's ever been."

#### A thriving theater scene

After graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Musical Theatre from Elon University in 2011, Meduri, who was born and raised in Salem, lived in New York City for a year.

He spent most of that time directing rather than performing, but something was drawing him back to Salem — family and community.

That's when he decided to move back

in 2013 and start Enlightened Theatrics, a theater company in downtown Salem producing professional productions and providing theatrical education.

Meduri said they bring in regional talent, as well as occasionally bringing in people from places like New York and Los Angeles, to work with local talent through their main stage productions.

They also pay their musicians, actors and technicians, he said, and although they are not an Equity house, they adhere to Actors Equity Association standards so they can provide a professional theater experience.

Much like the Elsinore Theatre, which started producing professional shows themselves during the summer of 2017 with "Little Shop of Horrors."

This differs from other companies like Pentacle Theatre, a volunteer-based community theater, or Theatre 33, a play development company producing original works from playwrights in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

These companies are not doing the same thing, and that's the point.

Each theater in the area — big or small, newer or older — contributes something to Salem's theater scene, which Gipson-King calls "stone soup."

"We all bring something," he said. "We bring our carrots or our potato, and we make this stew that we share with everybody, and we get something more than we put in."

Having different kinds of theater in Salem isn't just beneficial for the audiences; it also provides talent with avenues for education.

#### Educational, not just entertaining

The Cherry Blossom Theatre Festival is one of the Salem Theatre Network's most successful collaborations, Gipson-King said.

"It's an event we can only do together, no one company could do that on their own," he said.

The festival, going into its third year, will feature nine workshops and the One-Act Festival, a national competition featuring three productions from companies in the area.

Each company has 10 minutes to set

#### If you go

**What:** Cherry Blossom Theatre Festival is a three-day theater extravaganza featuring the national one-act competition and nine workshops ranging in skill level from beginner to expert.

**When:** 6 to 10 p.m. March 8, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. March 9, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. March 10

**Location:** Various locations in downtown Salem

**Cost:** \$10 Friday tickets, \$20-\$25 Saturday tickets, \$15 Sunday tickets, \$25-35 weekend passes

**Information:** [www.facebook.com/events/76171173731096](http://www.facebook.com/events/76171173731096)

up, 60 minutes to perform and 10 minutes to tear down. Professional adjudicators then critique the productions in front of the audience.

After deliberation, a catered reception and award ceremony will follow.

The One-Act Festival happens every other year and was at the first Cherry Blossom Theatre Festival. Joyce said this is unlike any other theater event because the audience can hear the built-in feedback.

The network decided to host more workshops this year instead of companies bringing their shows downtown, like last year, to put more of an emphasis on education rather than entertainment.

People of all skill levels are encouraged to participate, with some Splash classes available for those who want to "jump in and get their feet wet," to more advanced workshops.

#### Salem's 'Renaissance'

"If it's in Salem, it's not good enough" is a narrative the Salem Theatre Network — along with other downtown organizations — is trying to change.

While at Travel Salem for a meeting last fall, Gipson-King said someone came in because they wanted to take an out-of-town friend to Ashland to see theater, more than a three-hour drive from Salem.

Enlightened Theatrics was putting on "Sweeney Todd" that weekend.

"There is this change going on from the Salem my parents used to talk about," he said. "You do not have to drive hours to see some good theater; you don't have to drive an hour to see good theater."

The next step for the network is getting people outside of the arts scene to go and see productions in the area.

Instead of deciding to watch Netflix on a Friday night, get dinner, have a drink and see a show downtown, Meduri said, try something new and support local.

The Salem Theatre Network also includes Brush Creek Playhouse, Capitol City Theater, Children's Theatre Foundation, Heart and Shine, LLC, and Theatre Talk on KMUZ.

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