

## Saving Time



If the Grand Opera House is the grand dame of Oshkosh, then the Time Theater is her hip, scruffy little sister loitering vacantly on Main Street. The opera hall is a respected city staple featuring world-class artists and offering an elegant evening on the town. The Time, with its black on black sign and funky nonfunctioning ticket booth, shouts out experimental performances, unsung local talent, and homemade independent films from the curbside marquee.

While the plight of the Grand has garnered most media attention and patron support, both venues are in need of some rescue via restoration. It is important to honor an established center of entertainment, but equally essential to break new ground.

The Time Theater can be seen as a stepping stone to the Grand Opera House. It is a place for first-time playwrights to stage their productions, a great gig for local actors, and an open arena for regional jazz musicians, Super-8 filmmakers, magicians, comics, hip hop upstarts, teen garage bands, and avant-garde artists.

A few bright spots currently break up a main drag of retail stores and taverns, but the strolls surrounding the university still support a bar culture mentality that leaves many UWO students uninspired. Accessible creative space is necessary to elevate and stimulate downtown Oshkosh.

*Scene* spoke with Lori Hoover, a board member of the Community Theater Group and student of Urban and Regional Studies with a focus on city planning. Her interest is less that of a stoic academic preservationist and more an outgrowth of her urban spelunking adventures. As a member of the Fox Valley Urban Exploration Group, Hoover and fellow amateur archeologists investigate and photograph historic sites. It is sort of a post-punk Lewis & Clark journey with some pictorial tomb raiding thrown in.

**SCENE: You hosted a great Mardi Gras benefit for the Time Theater. What drew you to this project?**

Lori Hoover: During the gallery walk last fall, the Time Theater had the lobby open and I was able to review the rehabilitation plans and see the progress that had taken place since

2007. I had a conversation with the president of the board at the time, Joe Grier, and decided I wanted to be part of creating a vital arts venue downtown. I liked the idea of an underdog theater trying to provide space for artists, actors, and musicians.

I attended a board meeting to ensure my strengths met with their needs and started working on fundraising. Not only does this fit in with my major, but it is something I am passionate about. I am a complete cinephile. Theaters are my sanctuary. I also belong to the Fox Valley Urban Exploration Group.

**SCENE: Is that like abandoned building hacking?**

LH: Yes. We assemble a meet up group on line, get permission from property owners, and wander around vacant historic sites taking photographs.

**SCENE: What is the mission of Time? What does it hope to offer the community?**

LH: It is a venue for up and coming artists of all mediums: film, music, dance, comedy, you name it. It will not be competing with some of the larger theaters like the Grand Opera House or Leach Amphitheater. Instead, we would focus on affordable options for independent performers; a place where a rookie could feel like a pro without the risk. I think a non-threatening environment would invite a more varied creative population.

**SCENE: Why is a community theatre important?**

LH: We have a valuable grassroots arts community in Oshkosh. Our regular art walks are second to none in the Valley. I would even argue that because it's a little rougher around the edges, it is more colorful and diverse. There is an accessibility that encourages the fledgling, entry-level artisans to practice their craft. The Time Theater would be that perfect place to build local talent.

**SCENE: It demystifies the artistic process. Do you know some of the building's history?**

LH: I brought copies from old clippings with me. I like historical research and worked with two local librarians poring over the assessor's records. The space was constructed in 1874. We examined the fire maps from 1875 and saw that the flames went up as far as the area where the Blue Moon Café currently resides, but other documents shade up to where the Time is situated, so the space may have been impacted by the historic fire and rebuilt shortly after.

An 1890 Sanborn map shows Rundle/Manzer Photography Studio on the second floor and Webb & Brooks Hardware and Tin Shop on the first floor.

In May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1908, the grandiose Superba Theater opened promising a well-ventilated showroom with "clean and wholesome" films for the community. They offered the best of American and European moving pictures including musical accompaniment. For five

cents you could see *The Troubles of a New Drug Clerk*, *For the Squaw*, or *The Pretty Dairy Maid*.

In 1911 the space was refurbished and called Rex Theater, then it was renamed the New People's Theater in 1914, and in 1939 it became the Time.

**SCENE: What are some of the past events that took place in the theater?**

LH: There is a great history with too much to mention. On April 23, 1909, Pavarotti's mentor Enrico Caruso performed.

In the more recent past, we've had independent film debuts like *The Hungry Bull*, a straightjacket escape artist, Janet Planet, magicians, Dr. Kickbutt's Orchestra of Death, live painting by area artists, a Belgium jazz group called Amina Figeroa, and the Zombie Walk Contest.

There was a great event called Oshstock that featured high school bands blasting baby boomer music. It was so much fun and I thought "Where else would these talented untested performers get the chance to play locally?"

**SCENE: What are your upcoming events?**

LH: We have regular 80s dance nights a couple of times each month, a former American Idol contestant will be singing, and there is a regular rotation of musicians and other artists coming through.

The theater is also available for special events. We are hosting a wedding in October and a regional band is making a video at the Time. There is a calendar of events at [www.timecommunitytheater.com](http://www.timecommunitytheater.com).

**SCENE: What are the long-range goals for the space?**

LH: We need a couple of hundred thousand dollars to fully renovate the theater. As we start to become more operational, we will need money to create a fully functional venue. I suppose a dream would be to restore the Time to its former glory and apply for licensure to allow us to hold classic and foreign film festivals as well as offering a great sound stage for performers of all disciplines.

**SCENE: What is the current financial situation?**

LH: We are operating as a nonprofit organization. Mr. Staple, the owner of Kitz & Pfeil, owns the building and does not charge us rent. Right now, we are still in the fundraising stage. We need some interns to help develop a business plan and write grants.

**SCENE: How else can people get involved with the Community Theater Group of Oshkosh or with the "Save the Time" movement?**

LH: We can use help at all levels. The board is a wonderfully nonthreatening informal group of dedicated individuals with similar goals. We urge people to sit in during our meetings to see where they would best fit. Weather permitting, we get together on the last Wednesday of the month at 6:30 at the theater.

People can come on by, take a tour of the facilities, and talk to the president Rick Mari, Mary Manchester, Aaron Baer, or any of the members, and share ideas. Paypal donations can be made at the web site, but we also need hands-on help to fix up the inner workings of the building. Construction, cleaning, painting, staffing events, and providing materials are all a part of saving this historic space. Every little donation, even five dollars, is appreciated. Oshkosh has a tradition of our community investing in the theater.

**SCENE: You have a Facebook page, do you find social networking helpful in raising money and awareness?**

LH: We raised a few hundred dollars on line and we can update people with event notifications. Now you can follow us on Twitter!

**SCENE: Oshkosh seems to have a pro-downtown renovation brigade and a just-let-it-die contingent. What do you think is the importance of a thriving downtown business district?**

LH: It creates a sense of place, a unique gathering hub for civic matters, and a vibrant eclectic arts community. The location encourages diversity, bringing all walks of life together into a pedestrian observation gathering. Increased traffic creates a spillover audience for local arts and money for merchants. It is something uniquely Oshkosh. It's an age-old controversy but the two factions don't have to be in conflict. I hate to bring up the overused word "sustainability," but reinventing historic districts, adaptive reuse, just makes the town more livable. We want to recycle in a way that makes these buildings not only more palatable, but more pleasurable.

**SCENE: I would love a big used book store. In your dream downtown, what is Oshkosh missing?**

LH: It starts with changing our attitude and adapting our mindset to accepting diverse creativity. UWO is not a traditional commuter campus, but students and faculty often leave for Milwaukee or Appleton for the weekend so the college community might not be as invested in the downtown at this point in our development.

I think the Riverwalk will help with increased traffic. I would like to see green spaces set aside. Across from the Time is a parking lot that would make a beautiful conservatory with a living wall and water feature. There is also an empty area around the riverfront that could make a lovely green terrace. It sounds impractical, but people need an invitation to amble.

**SCENE: If you could imagine the best of all possible worlds, what bands, plays, or films would you like to see at the Time Theater?**

LH: I love Audrey Hepburn, so I would enjoy a film festival of her classic movies on the big screen. We have talked about offering seminars and public awareness platforms. Flamenco troops, literary figures, and younger performers deserve a place to showcase their talents.

I would love to see a theater evolving past a spectator sport and becoming a center for community interaction.

**SCENE: With the money needed to fix up the Grand Opera House, a local landmark, how do you convince people to donate funds for a brand new venture without a proven track record?**

LH: That is the challenge. Money is tight everywhere. The smallest donation makes a difference with a little venue like this. We need a place for the offbeat: poetry slams, paranormal gatherings, and other unique events. Anything you can think of, we can realize. It won't cost us as much to open the doors.

The Time Theater is similar to local artists who haven't proven themselves yet. It's struggling, but full of creative potential.