

# 'I can't believe a theater like this is here...'

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## Stony Creek's Legacy Theatre thrives despite challenges

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — Let's start with the upcoming season at Legacy Theatre.

There's the world premiere of "Masters of Puppets," a searing production exposing the underbelly of professional wrestling that features stars from Fox's "Empire" and CBS's "Evil"; the classic musical "Beauty and the Beast"; and "The Play that Goes Wrong," described as "part-Monty Python, part-Sherlock Holmes."

Add to that a valentine to musical theater composers, "The Musical of Musicals," that includes numbers from Stephen Sondheim, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Rodgers & Hammerstein, as well as a one-person concert series with a host of Broadway performers, co-productions with the Yale Opera, and "A Christmas Carol" for a Christmas run.

Not bad for a fledgling regional theater company that, over its nine years of gestation, weathered heady resistance from its neighbors over concerns of noise, endured protracted litigation on the viability of parking spaces, and opened its doors in the midst of the pandemic, withstanding one-quarter capacity concerts in the first months of its existence.

You might say that, on stage and off, it has all the makings of high drama.

And that's exactly as co-founders Keely Baisden Knudsen and Stephanie Stiefel Williams would have it.

Williams, an acclaimed vocalist and seasoned actor who's appeared on Broadway, recalled her

first time on stage. She was in high school. The play was "Godspell."

"It was just where I was meant to be, and that's kind of what it is with the arts," she said at a recent interview, settled in a bold red seat in the first row amid the mellow light of the theater.

"It gives people an outlet to be creative and to express themselves and, in the best circumstances, to uplift and inspire audiences. That's what drives, what's been driving, Keely and me."

"The arts saves lives," said Baisden Knudsen, with the no-nonsense authority worthy of one who has performed, directed, and choreographed internationally in plays, musicals, operas and dance companies in hundreds of theatrical productions, and taught performing arts courses at Yale, Fairfield, and the Hartt School, among others.

"A Texas gal," as she put it, she said her earliest appearance was on the raised indoor patio of her San Antonio home. She was 3. "I would put on shows and my brother would hold the flashlight, and from there it was just a finding anywhere I could express and emote," she said.

When it came time for college, there was only one destination: New York City. Specifically, the highly selective Tisch School of the Arts at NYU.

"People tried to talk me out of it. It was such a foreign concept to study theater in New York," Knudsen said. "But that never really mattered."



Arnold Gold / Hearst Connecticut Media

Legacy Theatre Artistic Director Keely Baisden Knudsen, left, and President Stephanie Williams photographed in the theater in Stony Creek.

The same passion, it seems, was in play for their determined transformation of the century-old boarded-up building into its current incarnation as idyllic regional theater.

You can see it in the way the two have stewarded the meticulous restoration of the exterior, with each board removed and numbered and refurbished and put back in exactly the same place.

"So the outside of the building looks exactly like it did 100 years ago," Williams said.

You can see it in the diminutive 127-seat theater, with its clean, wood-lined interior; its state-of-the-art rigging, lighting, and sound systems; and spaces overlapping and

interlocking to optimize every inch.

"It has this amazing legacy of Orson Welles and his Mercury players playing on this stage before going to Broadway and the nearly life-sized puppets of Jimmy Weil's puppet house, and we wanted to honor that and gift the community a historic theater that's also brand-new," said Knudsen.

You can see it in their commitment to producing a diversity of genres in the four pieces on the main stage each season.

"We wanted to hit on a musical, hit on a straight play, make sure that we educate our audience with a classic piece, and also have a new work that is highlighted, so we're

championing new playwrights," Knudsen said.

The aim, Knudsen said, "is that everyone will have at least a show that they feel strongly about attending, and hopefully they are subscribers so they would be exposed to other types of theater that they wouldn't otherwise have gone to."

Among the happy developments is the willingness of established actors to come to Stony Creek and perform alongside non-equity locals.

"We're lucky in that we've each been in the theater world for a while and we also have a lot of rich connections among our team, and that's a really unique and wonderful thing that we can offer," Knudsen said.

"We watch these performers come in and fall in love with this theater," Williams said.

It's not so different from first-time audience members, it seems.

"You always hear the same thing," she said. "I can't believe a theater like this is here in this little community. That never gets old."

*The Legacy Theatre is at 128 Thimble Islands Road in Stony Creek.*

*For subscriptions for Legacy Theatre's 2023 Mainstage Series, call the Box Office at 203-315-1901, or visit [LegacyTheatreCT.org](http://LegacyTheatreCT.org).*

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