

Outdoor Dramas Outperform Travel Industry & Broadway

Even though the U.S. travel and tourism industry was down 5-10 percent this past summer, the nation's outdoor historical dramas posted an overall increase in paid attendance of more than 13 percent.

The Institute of Outdoor Drama, a national service and advisory office of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, reports that total paid attendance for the 1991 summer season, based on early October figures from just 44 of the 75 outdoor drama companies across the country, stood at 1,939,237, compared with 1,712,515 in 1989 for the same number of theatre companies.

Between June 4 and Labor Day, more people attended outdoor history plays, religious dramas, Shakespeare festivals, and historical pageants across the country than saw all plays on Broadway. Total paid attendance for Broadway productions this summer was 1,854,146--only slightly above the 1988 Broadway summer season.

This was good news to representatives of outdoor historical drama companies from 21 states who gathered recently in Cherokee, North Carolina for the 28th Annual Conference of the Institute of Outdoor Drama, the only national meeting for those involved in the planning, production and management of outdoor historical dramas nationwide.

Outdoor historical drama, which got its start in this country in 1937 with Paul Green's The Lost Colony, now celebrating its 50th season in Manteo, North Carolina, involves the production of an original play depicting historical events which took place on or near the theatre site. The strong sense of place and of basic human values, along with the larger-than-life portrayals and generous portions of song and dance -- often supplemented with spectacular special

effects -- combine to create a unique form of epic American theatre, viewed last year by more than 2 million people.

Attending the conference in Cherokee were representatives from communities in Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, all of whom are currently planning the production of new outdoor historical dramas. Together with general managers, directors and playwrights, they gathered in Cherokee for three days of panel discussions and workshops interspersed with social events, tours of local historic attractions, and an evening of live theatre presented by members of the cast of The Reach of Song, the official historic drama of the state of Georgia.

In light of the recent controversy swirling around the National Endowment for the Arts, of special note at the conference was guest panelist Jessica Andrews, director of the NEA's Theatre Program, who traveled from Washington, DC, to participate in a discussion of "Ethics and Professional Theatre Practice."

Highlighting the conference was the announcement by Institute director Scott J. Parker of the creation of the Mark R. Sumner Award, honoring the lifetime contribution of the man who for 25 years headed the Institute of Outdoor Drama.

"Introduced wherever he goes in America as 'Mr. Outdoor Drama,'" noted Parker, "Mark Sumner is the one person in the country who knows more about this unique form of theatre than anyone else; the one person who, more than anyone else, has nurtured and encouraged it. To establish the first nationwide award for significant contribution to outdoor historical drama in Mark's name is an altogether fitting and appropriate honor. Future recipients will take genuine pride in being associated with his name and reputation."

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The award will recognize significant contribution by an individual to a specific drama, or to the outdoor historical drama movement as a whole, including, but not limited to, playwrighting, directing, acting, design, theatre architecture, patronage, scholarship, musical composition, technology and innovation, producing and administration.

"While we hope to present the award annually," Parker said, "to ensure its place as the highest national recognition in our profession, the Sumner Award will be presented only when, in the opinion of the Institute's Administrative Board, a nominee warrants such prestigious recognition."

Co-hosted by the Cherokee Historical Association, this year's conference featured an inside look at the amphitheatre and support facilities of one of the nation's premiere outdoor historical dramas, Kermit Hunter's Unto These Hills. Since opening in the Mountainside Theatre on July 1, 1950, the play, with its cast of 130, has been seen by nearly 5 million people.

The Mountainside Theatre, built in 1949, is an outstanding example of an older facility that has been maintained in excellent condition. During the mid-1980s the Cherokee Historical Association spent \$243,000 renovating the then-35-year-old amphitheatre, installing new seats, cross aisles, trails, ramps and electrical wiring. During the 1987 and 1988 seasons, CHA refurbished the theatre's backstage for an estimated \$340,000, and added a new entranceway made of native stone.

The centerpiece of the renovation is the Association's new administration building, completed in 1986. The modern, \$627,000 structure houses all administrative offices, as well as permanent exhibits recounting the organization's forty-year history.