

A Quirky Little Theatre under the Stars Celebrates 50 Years



Audience waits to enjoy a performance.



Shaw's Shop in the 1960s.



Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre performs Addams Family.

The venue itself is a lot like many of the musicals performed upon its stage: full of commitment, characters, history, determination, dreams and true grit. This a theatre unlike any other in Annapolis.

My welcome to the Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre (ASGT) came via an email last winter, announcing the upcoming 50th year anniversary season of the theatre and would I consider stopping by. Absolutely, I would consider stopping by. So I did.

It was an unreasonably windy and cool day and volunteers were preparing the theatre for its opening. There were flowers to be planted, sweeping, cleaning, stage and lights readied – there were probably a million things to be done because the theatre had slept through the winter and now was its time to awake and shine. A handful of volunteers were working diligently to ensure that happened.



Preparing for opening of summer theatre.

First, let me explain for those who don't realize what the summer part of ASGT is all about and why it hibernates during the winter. This is a building, with a front in possession of a roof. But that's the front of the house. The rear – no roof. This is theatre under the stars. Looking at the façade, which appears very much at home in historic downtown Annapolis, you really have no idea what awaits beyond the door.

“So many Annapolitans walk past this building all the time and don't know it's a theatre,” remarked Lauren Winther-Hansen, ASGT's communications director.

But seeing it is awe-inspiring – it's just kind of fantastic. Having no roof, the ASGT is closed during the winter. But in the summer, it shines.

“When the sun goes down and the lights go on, this place is kind magical,” said Winther-Hansen.

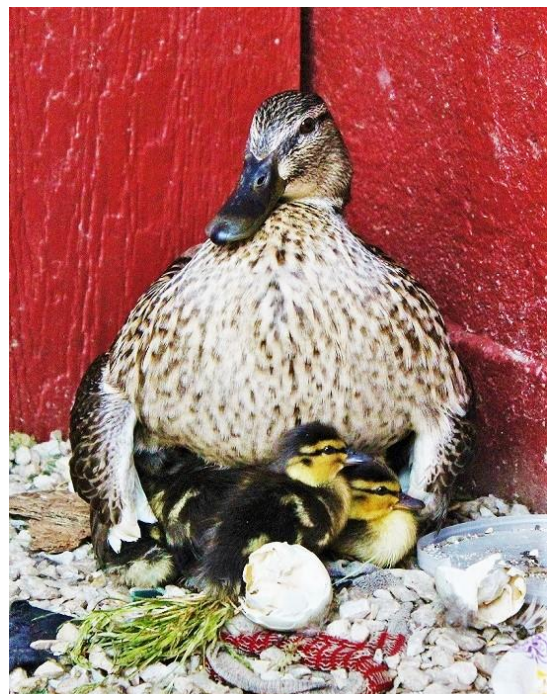
Ok, I can see that, but thinking from a business point of view, wouldn't a roof help? Will ASGT ever get a roof?

“It comes up all the time, but we're not going to,” said Winther-Hansen. “It wouldn't be Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre if we did. It rains, there are hurricanes – we've got things other theatres don't need to worry about.”

She then spoke about a web-footed friend named Lucy, a duck that takes up residence in the theatre in the spring – not necessarily for love of musicals, but for a great place to lay eggs and raise a family. Agreed – no roof. This is character. This is Annapolis at its best.

With 196 seats, which, by the way, ASGT is now crowdfunding for new and improved ones, Winther-Hansen says they've been fortunate with ticket sales. “We've had capacity crowds for the last few years,” she explained.

Exactly how did the ASGT, which is mostly run by volunteers with an all-volunteer cast of actors, become the owner of such prime real estate in downtown Annapolis?



Lucy the Duck with her chicks.

They were kind of in the right place at exactly the right time. Once upon a time, Winther-Hansen explained, it was the Shaw's Blacksmith Shop, before it was acquired by Anne Arundel County's Board of Education with the thought of using it for their headquarters. When they realized it would be too small, it was rented to ASGT for \$1 per year as long as was used as a theatre. The Board of Education then found their new property on Riva Road and, long story short, according to Winther-Hansen, Anne Arundel County transferred ownership to ASGT.

The ASGT was founded in 1966, making this year, yes, its 50th year of presenting musicals – just musicals. This season that means "The Wedding Singer," "Rent," and "The Producers." Performances are in the evening, after sunset, with no matinees, because this is the theatre under the stars, Thursday through Sunday and some Wednesday nights here and there. In September, a special performance called "50 Years Under The Stars: A Musical Retrospective" will close out ASGT's 50th season.

For more information on ASGT or to purchase tickets, visit the website.

Photos courtesy of Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre; Donna Cole.

<http://explorerannapolis.com/quirky-little-theatre-stars-celebrates-50-years/>