

# The COLONIAL Theatre

## A HISTORY OF THE COLONIAL THEATRE KEENE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

The Colonial Theatre first opened its doors on January 29, 1924. Located in the heart of the city on Main Street, it quickly became a focal point for the arts. Owner Charles Baldwin proudly called it "New England's most modern and perfectly appointed theater." Over the years, the Theatre has hosted movies, vaudeville shows, operas and numerous community events. Some early highlights were:

- Metropolitan Opera star Rosa Ponselle singing four encores of "O Sole Mio"
- Thornton Wilder reading from *The Women of Argos*;
- Amelia Earhart lecturing on the possibilities of cross-Atlantic air travel;
- Maude Adams performing Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

By 1945, almost 20 years after opening, the stage no longer held actors in pursuit of their craft as it had done so proudly for the previous sixteen years. Instead celluloid movie stars captured the attention of audiences, and the majesty of The Colonial began to disintegrate over time. By the early 1990s, it looked like the only remaining historic theater in Keene might not survive.

In 1991 a small group of devoted Keene citizens decided that The Colonial Theatre must be saved. By 1993 they had established the theatre as a non-profit group and begun to articulate a mission. Their efforts resulted in hiring an administrative staff and obtaining \$2 million from grants and private donations from the community to begin infrastructure renovations. By March 3, 1995 the restored hardwood stage was in use once again.

Since that time more than 350 live performances have entertained and enlightened audiences of all ages. Award winning films are shown nightly on the largest state-of-the-art movie screen in the region. In 2004 The Colonial Theatre was placed on the New Hampshire State Registers of Historic Places. As we begin our second decade as a not-for-profit organization we are proud to continue the tradition of excellence for which The Colonial is known.

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*Ensuring the past has a future!*

- 1923 Construction begins under the direction of architects Harold Mason and Steven Haynes of Keene and Fitchburg and builder Glenroy Scott of Winchester.
- 1924 January 29--Opening Night--Premier film "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" starring Lon Chaney. Owner Charles Baldwin gives away 6000 free tickets.
- 1925 Theater purchased by the Latchis family.
- 1929 Thornton Wilder begins spoken word tradition reading **The Women of Argos**.
- 1932 Amelia Earhart lectures on the possibility of trans-Atlantic air travel; Maud Adams performs **Twelfth Night**.
- 1945 Live entertainment is discontinued.
- 1984 Steve Levin and Ira Gavin purchase theater--live entertainment returns.
- 1991 Local citizens explore non-profit status for the theater.
- 1993 The Colonial Theatre Group, Inc. officially purchases property at 95 Main Street.
- 1994 Phase I renovation (infrastructure) begins with help from Keene Economic Development & Revitalization Corporation and local businesses.
- 1995 Keene Lions Club presents **My Fair Lady**--first live theatre performance on restored stage in fifty years.
- 1997 Phase II renovations (restoration and beautification) begin with help from more than 300 individual, foundation and corporate supporters.
- 1999 Keene Mayor recognizes The Colonial as "an historic landmark in downtown Keene".
- 1999 Marquee is restored to light up Main Street.
- 2000 Phase II restoration is completed.
- 2004 Sprinkler system is installed in theater auditorium, "Colonial Corner" is refurbished.
- 2004 The Colonial celebrates its 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and is named to New Hampshire Register of Historic Places.
- 2013 The Colonial celebrates its 90<sup>th</sup> birthday as a theatre



The Colonial Theatre is a small independent 501 3c non-profit and not a municipal property. The Colonial does not receive city or tax funds meaning we rely on ticket sales, memberships, corporate giving and grant writing just to break even each season. We have a volunteer board, 5 full time staff, numerous part time or contracted staff and 150 volunteer ushers.

The main role of the Colonial is as a presenters' theatre. Essentially we book shows and films in our venue, and we included education programs as well as community outreach and partnerships.

What exactly is the difference between presenting theatre and producing theatre? The distinction is elementary to those "in the biz," but it may not necessarily be clear to a lot of other people.

Overall, the theatre *producer* builds a show from the ground up, **capitalizes** the show, hires the creative team, cast, and so on.

The **presenter** or **presenter theatre** then buys this fully formed show and programs it at that venue, and deals with the process of getting that show into the venue, and up and running for that specific engagement. So, the presenter has to deal with hiring local stagehands and wardrobe attendants, renting necessary equipment for loading the show in and out, etc. The presenter does not need to do any casting, or hire the director, or deal with any of the inner workings of the show, except for, perhaps, how these inner workings might interface with the presenter's venue. For instance, the producer is responsible for providing the actual full physical show that is going on tour, but may need to work with a presenter to make sure the show fits in his venue. Also, in some cases, a show may not be "self-contained" and so local musicians may need to be hired by the presenter to fill out the orchestra as required by local union conditions.

There are some presenters out there who, when they choose to produce, will **produce shows at their own venues**. When a presenter produces at her own venue, it will likely be a much more "hands on" experience than if he were one of many producers on a Broadway production, and if it is a new, large work, her venue would be the lead producer on what could be a possible pre-Broadway project that would also be a world-premiere. A presenter that joins in as a producer on a Broadway show, more likely than not, does so, at least in part, because he has an interest in that show coming to his venue when the show presumably goes out on tour a year or so later.