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VILLAGES IN-DEPTH

HOW OUR COMMUNITY WORKS

Big Venues: The Sharon, left, seats 1,022, and Savannah Center seats 844 in its concert hall.

Dream Machine

The Villages entertainment operation churns out a vast array of performances at venues throughout the community every day of the year. It's a well-oiled undertaking that shows no signs of slowing down. — By Kristen Fiore, Daily Sun Senior Writer

1 Marketing the event: The process starts months before the show goes on sale, said marketing coordinator Kyle Coppola, who works closely with the event promoter on a web presence, ticket pricing, promotional photos or video.

2 Booking the talent: Lining up acts is a constant cross-check between dates, demand and cost for Brian Russo, director of entertainment at Savannah Center, and Elizabeth Constant, booking coordinator at The Sharon.

3 Running the show: Planning the technical complexity can start six months in advance for Kenneth Constant, The Sharon's technical director, and Josh Carlson, technical director for Savannah Center and the squares.

5 Overseeing the box office: The staff of Yasmeen Stogden, director of ticketing and customer relations, handles tickets for 400 to 500 events each year. They work on all sales details, right down to the ticketing envelopes.

4 Managing the house: Rebecca Morse, house manager at The Sharon, and Jamie Gust, house manager at Savannah Center, look after the talent, manage the property, assist with the production and answer patron questions.

On the Silver Screen: Theaters on all three town squares show a variety of films. The Barnstorm Theater hosts Midnight Movie Madness on Fridays and Saturdays, and the Rialto Theater plays Broadway and Metropolitan Opera shows.

Small Shows: The Studio Theatre is a 99-seat venue that produces around 200 performances of about nine titles every year. It's the only theater in The Villages that produces the entire show in-house.

Live Music: All three town squares host live entertainment every night of the year as well as events throughout the year such as market nights, farmers markets and holiday festivals.

Dinner & Dancing: Located at Spanish Springs Town Square, Katie Belle's offers entertainment and a full-service restaurant. Patrons can enjoy dinner and drinks along with the show or hit the dance floor.

In The Villages' growing entertainment universe, no sooner does one curtain fall than another rises.

Here, The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center, The Studio Theatre Tierra del Sol and Savannah Center marked nearly 500 curtain calls for a whopping 194 shows last year.

Here, dinner and dancing to live bands have residents bustling in to a busy supper club nightly.

Here, movie theaters on three town squares host midnight showings of hot releases, Broadway shows and Metropolitan Opera performances alike.

And here, a network of about 120 performing groups provide live entertainment on three town squares every single day of the year — at no cost to patrons.

It's a massive arts apparatus that's come a long

Please See DREAM, C8

Illustration by Bonita Burton, Daily Sun

THEN & NOW

Advent of Town Squares

How the three centers for shopping, dining and entertainment came to be hubs for residents and visitors looking to enjoy The Villages lifestyle.

1998 Spanish Springs Town Square opens, with a tent set up in the current location of the La Reina Building.

TODAY The square features more than a dozen restaurants, nearly 40 shops, the eight-screen Rialto Theatre and the Broadway-quality Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center.

2004 Lake Sumter Landing Market Square opens with a night of music and dancing in the pavilion.

TODAY During the last 15 years, Lake Sumter Landing has grown to include more than a dozen restaurants, nearly 60 shops, the eight-screen Old Mill Playhouse and special boat cruises on Lake Sumter. While plenty of room exists all around for dancing and chairs, wooden elevated platforms were placed on two sides as well to provide a better view for those enjoying from the edges.

2012 Brownwood Paddock Square comes alive with music under the log cabin pavilion.

TODAY The square features eateries, shops and the eight-screen Barnstorm Theater. It's not done growing. Soon Villagers also will see the addition of the Center for Advanced Health-care at Brownwood and the adjoining Brownwood Hotel & Spa.

Illustrations by Colin Smith, Daily Sun

from the front page

VILLAGES IN-DEPTH

The Sharon

The Sharon, a state-of-the-art performing arts center with a seating capacity of 1,022, brings big-city entertainment to The Villages. The Sharon has hosted acts such as The Beach Boys, "Chicago," Howie Mandel and Art Garfunkel. The venue has approximately 20 full-time staff members and more than 200 volunteer ushers.



Country singer Ronnie Milsap

The Studio Theatre

The Studio Theatre is a 99-seat blackbox theater that provides a cozy space for the compelling shows it puts on. The Studio Theatre produces around nine titles and approximately 200 performances every year. It is the only professional production theater in The Villages, meaning that the entire show is produced in house.



"The Story of My Life"

Savannah Center

Savannah Center is both a recreation center and an 844-seat concert hall. It provides both professional and community theater and concerts. Savannah Center has hosted acts such as The Drifters, "Menopause the Musical," and Little Anthony and the Imperials.



— Kristen Fiore, Daily Sun Central Florida Lyric Opera



You came to The Villages to redefine the scope of entertainment offered here. Is The Sharon and The Studio everything you envisioned?

I was in Chicago before moving here, but I studied theater in New York City for five years prior to our return to Chicago in 2013. I lived in both NYC and Chicago from 2006 to 2015 studying and working in the theater as both an actor and producer. I was the literary manager and casting director of Prologue Theatre Co. in Chicago for most of those years while also getting my MFA Acting at Columbia University. We moved here to The Villages to run The Sharon in 2014 (I split my time as I was still working as an actor in Chicago) and both spaces have exceeded all my expectations. The Studio's popularity still floors me and we are three seasons into production there. Every year the acts we bring into The Sharon bring me joy and amazement.

What do you do as the artistic director of The Sharon and The Studio?

My job as artistic director for both spaces mostly comes



Whitney Morse is the artistic director at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center and The Studio Theatre Tierra del Sol.

down to curation. I am the final say on what acts we bring in to The Sharon and what shows we produce at The Studio. I also oversee the design elements of The Studio's productions, lead script selection sessions and oversee marketing. Of course there are many other facets to my job, but that is the biggest part of it.

Expand on how The Studio is not a community theater but rather a venue shaped off a regional-style theater.

A community theater is a wonderful place for theater enthusiasts to volunteer their time to make local productions. Usually in a community theater most people are not

paid for their efforts. It is a lot of fun, and I certainly did my fair share of it as I was growing up locally at places like the Melon Patch and Bay Street Players. They are vital parts of a thriving arts community and a wonderful place to learn the basics of theatre and production. However, they are not considered professional settings. At The Studio, every single person that works there is paid and paid well for their work. They are all theater professionals who work in their field and earn a living doing so. No one at The Studio (aside from our wonderful ushers) is an unpaid volunteer. Another big distinction between a community theater and a professional regional theater is hiring. We cast our shows and look for our design team nationally. We have brought in artists from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, just to name a few. Community theaters rely solely on the local community — hence the name. We do also use a lot of local talent, but again they are paid theater professionals. I wanted to bring professional regional theater to The Villages because I saw the need. The closest professional regional theaters to The Villages were at least an hour in any direction, and now we have it just a golf cart ride away.

What are your goals for The Studio and The Sharon in the future?

My goals for both spaces are to expand our audience and reach both inside and outside The Villages. I want our theaters to be destinations regardless of where you call home in Central Florida.

— Kristen Fiore, Daily Sun

DREAM

Continued from C1

way in the 30 years since bands first performed under a red and white leaky tent on the east side of U.S. Highway 27/441, surrounded by construction zones.

But as the community grew — developed by a family with a musical matriarch — so did the entertainment engine behind a powerful magnetic pull.

Entertainment at Lake Sumter Landing Market Square and Brownwood Paddock Square alone lured more than a million people in 2016, according to Sumter County records.

"The events are heavily attended," said Doug Gilpin, District 2 Sumter County Commissioner and Chairman of the County Tourist Development Council, who added that this elite amenity often entices visitors to become residents.

"Along with that, all of the restaurants and shopping areas have a lot of foot traffic

because people are out having a good time," he said. "All of that is a big economic driver for Sumter County."

That foot traffic is \$34 per patron, up from \$30 in 2015, according to the Americans for the Arts, a national cultural advocacy organization.

Florida's arts industry generates \$4.7 billion of economic activity — including \$2.3 billion by nonprofit organizations — according to a 2017 study commissioned by the group. Researchers also found that:

- » This economic activity supports 132,366 full-time jobs and generates \$3.4 billion in resident household income.
- » Florida's arts and cultural industry delivers \$492.3 million in local and state government revenue.
- » Creative industry establishments represent 6 percent of all businesses in the state.
- » People across Florida's 67 counties attended more than 42,750 arts and cultural

events, as did 10.6 million visitors from out of state.

» On a national level, the arts create \$166.3 billion in economic activity and support 4.6 million jobs.

"The vast diversity of our state is represented best by our thriving arts and cultural industry," said Ken Detzner, Florida's secretary of state and chief cultural officer in the study. "It creates jobs, stimulates tourism and fosters creativity that makes our communities distinct and vibrant."

The arts also retain local dollars.

When asked what they would have done if the arts event they were attending was not taking place, 45 percent of respondents told the Americans for the Arts that they would have traveled to a different community to attend a similar cultural event.

"A destination that flourishes in the arts and cultural activities has a unique advantage

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from the front page

VILLAGES IN-DEPTH

Top Five Things to Know About the Box Office

1 There are five box office locations. Box offices are located on all three squares as well as at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center and Savannah Center. Tickets can be purchased in person at the box offices, over the phone by calling 352-753-3229 or online at thevillagesentertainment.com.

2 Resources online and at the box office are abundant. Patrons can view seats, read information about upcoming shows, learn about the different venues that The Villages has to offer and check out various FAQ pages about purchases, parking, accessibility and more.

3 Though the box office maintains the industry standard of not issuing refunds after a show has closed, box office staff are more than happy to accommodate patrons with a gift card of Villages Entertainment credit as long as communication happens prior to the start of a performance.

4 Gift cards, which also can be purchased through the box office, do not expire and can be used for all shows at The Sharon, The Studio Theatre Tierra del Sol and Savannah Center as well as select shows at Katie Belle's, recreation centers and churches.

5 The patron experience is the most important aspect of the box office's business model. Box office employees highly encourage open communication in order to build trust with patrons as well as promoters and performers.

— Kristen Fiore, Daily Sun

Continued from Previous Page

and competitive edge over other destinations," said Carol Dover, president and CEO of the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association.

A show at The Sharon "is normally a sold-out night for us," agreed Dennis Demshar, owner of the nearby restaurant that bears his name. "We take reservations and walk-ins, and we get people before and after the show. As far as entertainment on the square, we get a lot of people who want to sit outside. Our outside patio fills up."

Brains Behind The Scenes

"I think it's amazing, the fact that they have all of those squares to entertain people, the Savannah Center, which seems to be at a good price point and all kinds of shows at The Sharon," said Joe Bamford, who runs Get Off the Bus Concerts, a booking company that puts on many of the shows at The Sharon and Savannah Center.

Bamford, who lives part-time in Tavares and Canada, owned a tour bus company that connected him with entertainers around the world. He also managed bands such as The Kings, Glass Tiger and The Headstones.

Those contacts have brought groups such as KC and the Sunshine Band, Charley Pride, Ronnie Milsap, Bill Engvall, George Thorogood, Vickie Lawrence and Kansas to The Villages.

"Once they walk into The Sharon, they're always like, 'Wow, this is really nice,'" he said. "When the show is over, they all want to come back."

Patrons keep coming back, too.

In 2018, there were 22 sold-out shows at The Sharon, and 50 sold-out shows at Savannah Center.

Season three subscriptions for The Studio Theatre sold out in less than an hour.

"Every little piece of the performance has to be combed through by several people to make sure we can accommodate the act without sacrificing quality or expending too much," said Brian Russo, director of entertainment who books the shows at Savannah Center.

Once a performance is booked, the marketing leg starts producing buzz, months before tickets go on sale.

"Each person responsible for their specific tasks works together to make sure all the I's are dotted and the T's are crossed," said marketing coordinator Kyle Coppola. "We work closely with the promoter so we get the correct information on the website, ticket pricing, promotional photos or video."

Refining the experience is an ongoing process.

"We're constantly looking at statistics to see how performances are selling and what is working and not working," said marketing coordinator Julie Dunagan. "And then we switch to our creative hats to push it further or fix something."

That drives the public to the box office's website and five physical locations.

The staff handles tickets sales for more than 10 venues catering to 400 to 500 events each year.

"Providing information regarding all The Villages has to offer on any given day is a huge part of our daily interactions," said Yasmeen Stogden, director of ticketing and

customer relations. "Whether we have the information in-house or not, box office employees are frequently networking to do the hard work so our patrons don't have to."

Staff members always are trying to make the experience better, she said.

"This requires everyone's attention to detail and a sense of camaraderie that I've yet to experience elsewhere," she said.

Meeting a show's technical needs starts up to six months in advance at The Sharon, when Kenneth Constant, the facility's technical director, connects with the touring show's technical director. Traveling shows often require a scramble on the day of the performance.

"Typically, we'll install all of their tech needs, run the show and load them back onto their trucks within a 20-hour period," he said.

At The Studio Theatre, the crew typically has a one- to two-week turnaround time. The set design, lighting and sound is created months prior, although editing can follow to the last minute.

It's then up to the house staff to take care of the talent and patrons.

"I have an affinity for the fast-paced nature of this job, and to work in a department where I get to wear so many hats is something I consider a privilege," said Layna Sasser, assistant company manager and artist liaison at The Sharon. "There's never a dull moment."

At the front of the house, the house managers and ushers answer patron questions and resolve challenges.

"When I got promoted to the house manager position, I pretty much guaranteed Brian Russo that I will treat anyone who walks into the Savannah

Center like I would treat my own father," said Jamie Gust, house manager at Savannah Center. "I just want everybody to have fun and enjoy their time."

And they're always looking ahead, too.

"We work alongside amazing staff who really keep their mind in the present and notify the administration if anything is off," said Elizabeth Constant, who books the shows at The Sharon. "But I can more easily answer the question, 'What's coming in year 2020?' than I can, 'What show is next week?'"

Family At The Forefront

Like much of The Villages, the community's arts scene enjoys special attention from its founding family.

Morse family matriarch Sharon Morse was an accomplished interior designer by trade, but she also was an acclaimed singer who adored going to the theater with her husband, H. Gary Morse.

Before moving to Florida, she performed regularly at the family's northern Michigan restaurant, Brownwood Acres, and passed down her love of theater and music to her children and grandchildren.

Her granddaughter, Whitney Morse, is now the artistic director at The Sharon with her husband, Jason Goedken, who is the facility's operations manager. Both have extensive theater backgrounds in bigger cities. Whitney's mother, Rebecca Morse, is The Sharon's house manager.

Whitney Morse has commemorated her grandmother's love for the arts with "Don't Tell Nonnie," a popular open mic event The Sharon's lobby.

"Sharon was my grandmother, and my cousins and I called her Nonnie," she explained at one of the events. "I thought it would be really fun to call it 'Don't Tell Nonnie,' but for the record, we could've told Nonnie. She would've loved this! She would've been up here singing."

The Sharon opened in 2015, a stunning remodel of the non-denominational Church on The Square. Stained-glass windows and pipes from the organ are still featured in the 12,846-square-foot grand lobby.

The state-of-the-art facility can seat up to 1,022. By comparison, the Reilly Arts Center in Ocala seats 709 and the Mount Dora Community Building seats 618. The city of Tavares, 23 miles from The Villages, has

recently announced plans to build a small performing arts center of its own.

Morse and Goedken also launched The Studio Theatre Tierra del Sol, a blackbox theater with 120 seats and options for thrust-, round- or proscenium-style seating. Its season runs from late September through April each year with four productions running about 160 total performances.

Just weeks ago, the couple released a video Christmas card on social media singing

"Last Christmas" with their young son and newborn baby in their lap.

It was just another message of the family's ongoing love of the arts.

"Dad was all about the show, and mom was the show," Whitney's father, Mark Morse, president and CEO of the Villages, has said.

Kristen Fiore is a senior staff writer with The Villages Daily Sun. She can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5270, or kristen.fiore@thevillagesmedia.com.

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