

MAKING THE MAGIC HAPPEN

BY
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Q&A WITH WHITNEY MORSE AND ELIZABETH CONSTANT

Top-notch entertainment turns up the fun factor in The Villages. At exceptional venues including the Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center, Savannah Center and the Studio Theatre at Tierra Del Sol, residents have the luxury of seeing their favorite artists and shows on area stages. If you've ever wondered what goes into securing world-class entertainment, find out what Whitney Morse and Elizabeth Constant have to say about their exciting roles at Villages venues.



WHITNEY MORSE

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF
THE SHARON L. MORSE
PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
AND THE STUDIO THEATRE
AT TIERRA DEL SOL

Q. Tell us about the journey that has taken place at The Sharon and the Studio Theatre.

A. The Sharon has certainly gained notoriety since we first opened back in April of 2015. When we were first starting out, it was harder to book meetings with agents and get the kinds of acts in the space that we were looking to host. But we still managed to pull off an excellent first season, despite some very sharp growing pains. Now we have great relationships with many agents and presenters and have ironed out most of the kinks in booking. Physically, the space has remained the same. We have done a few maintenance updates and slight cosmetic changes, but nothing huge.

At the Studio, things have changed a bit since our first show in November of 2016. We have added seats — we had 99 then, and we now have 120. We also added performances in an attempt to meet the demand for tickets. In our first season, we did roughly 30 performances per production. Now we are up to around 35. We have also tweaked our reserved seat for subscribers policy. We now limit each performance to 50 percent subscribers so there is plenty of room for single-ticket purchasers to select seats. Physically we have added a restroom with a shower to our dressing room. Before this addition, performers had to use the restroom in the restaurant. This is a step up for sure. I hope you all didn't mind our dust this past season while we finished up that project!

Q. Which shows or artists have been most popular?

A. At The Sharon, I'd say Jersey Boys and Tony Bennett have been most popular. At the Studio, it is hard to say. We have about a 99 percent sellout rate, so it is hard to gauge popularity by ticket sales. Based on audience comments after the show, I'd say "Red" and "Next To Normal" were favorites.

Q. How have Villagers played a role in the evolution of performances or changes within the venue?

A. We definitely pay attention to our patrons! If something sells well, we know to bring more of that kind of entertainment to our patrons.

Q. Who decides which performers or shows will take the stage? Tell us about that process.

A. At The Sharon, we have a team of three people — me, Elizabeth Constant and Jason Goedken. We attend two conferences every year where we meet with agents and promoters and select shows we think our patrons want to see that will also fit in our space. We then spend the rest of the time scheduling and executing contracts to bring those acts into The Sharon. At the Studio, it is very different because, for the most part, we produce the shows that you see there (with the exception of Victory Productions Summer Series — those shows are not produced by us) so it all starts with scripts. We spend about six months from July through January reading plays and musicals. This year we have about 130 on the list to be considered for Season 4. I have a committee of seven people who meet once a month after reading sometimes up to 25 selections per month to discuss the play's merits, faults and mission fit. Once we have pared that all the way down to the four we have decided are right for us that season, we move on to selecting directors, designing sets, holding auditions, casting, then finally about 18 months after we began the process of script selection, we will begin rehearsal on our first show of the season. We then rehearse for 2.5 weeks, add the technical elements, then have a few dress rehearsals, three previews then — BANG! We're open!

Q. How do the three venues differ from one another?

A. I think the biggest difference between the three main venues in The Villages is size. The Sharon has more stage and fly space and can seat a couple hundred people more than Savannah Center. The Savannah Center is much bigger and can seat about 700 more people than the Studio. Each brings excellent entertainment to The Villages, and across all three spaces, we are able to offer an amazing variety of live performances.

Q. What are you most proud of?

A. I am most proud of the Studio in general. We knew people would love The Sharon, but we weren't really sure how people would react to the intimate style of performance the Studio hosts. Much to my glee, people love it! Every show we produce there makes me beam with pride. We have an amazing and creative team of designers and carpenters on staff here and the talent we are able to bring in from all over the country makes me so happy.

Q. Tell us what's in the works and what you and the staff are excited about.

A. Well, I can't tell you much you don't already know really, but our websites are a great way to keep up-to-date with everything we have going on in both our spaces. I think personally, I am most excited about "Rock of Ages" at The Sharon and "Stop Kiss" at the Studio.





ELIZABETH CONSTANT

BOOKING COORDINATOR
OF THE SHARON L. MORSE
PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Q. What is your role?

A. I contract all of the acts at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center as well as additional general administrative duties in the Arts Admin offices.

Q. What's a typical day like for you?

A. A typical day is 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. behind my desk and sometimes a show at night as well. In the office, I handle all of the negotiations, contracts, schedules and events at The Sharon. Mainly, this consists of emails to various parties all day long — agents, co-workers, promoters, etc. I also work at The Sharon during shows and act as manager on duty. I am one of two staff members who switch off working show dates. We're there as support to house management. It's a great way to see the shows and patrons reactions while mingling with our awesome usher volunteers!

Q. Tell us about the journey that has taken place at the entertainment venues in The Villages.

A. When I arrived in The Villages to be a part of the performing arts center staff, there were only four employees at the venue, including my husband and me! Now we have 30 co-workers running The Sharon and the Studio. The staff growth has been wonderful to be a part of and see these theater professionals truly make an amazing performing arts center run.

When I was first hired, we had six months to start booking shows before the venue opened. When we arrived at the national booking conference in New York, no one took us seriously. The venue was still being built, we didn't have a website or even business cards to hand out at that point. It was challenging to explain this amazing state-of-the-art theater being built in Central Florida and to get agents to trust us to route their shows through the building. Now, our phones don't stop ringing with acts and agencies hoping to secure their acts in the venue. They see how attentive and enthusiastic the patrons are in The Villages and how much they enjoy live entertainment. Of course, they want the artists to perform here!

Q. Which shows or artists have been most popular?

A. At The Sharon, Frankie Avalon was the quickest sellout at 38 minutes. Other quick sellouts at The Sharon were Jersey Boys, Johnny Mathis, Willie Nelson and the Beach Boys. We've had Mathis and the Beach Boys back again because they were in such high demand. I know when artists are very popular because patrons start sending us mail or gifts to deliver to the artists backstage. They don't always take them or respond, but we always deliver them to the tour manager backstage. I always tell people who are eager to see a performer to put the date of the show in their calendar and also add the "On Sale" date as well, because tickets go fast.

Q. How have Villagers played a role in the evolution of performances or changes within the venue?

A. In my opinion, Villagers have everything to do with the performances and changes to the venue. All shows are specifically hand-selected by The Sharon staff with the residents in mind. I get emails sometimes from residents requesting certain shows. I research who represents that act and immediately reach out to their agent to see if they are within our budget and available in Florida. If they are, I book them immediately. Judy Collins and Scotty McCreery came to us that way. Judy Collins is returning April 2019 because she was so popular.

Also, generations play a big part in booking, particularly with concerts. Artists who were popular in the 1950s and '60s, such as Frankie Avalon or Bobby Rydell, are still popular, but now we are also hosting acts such as Rock of Ages, Styx and Scotty McCreery.

Q. Who decides which performers or shows will take the stage? Tell us about that process.

A. We have a small committee on staff that helps choose the artists hosted at The Sharon. Whitney Morse, the artistic director, has the final say on which artists we host. Jason Goedken, the operations manager, makes sure it's financially feasible. And if it all works out, then I make the call or email to book the show.

To book a show, we either search for a particular title that's currently touring or an agent pitches us an artist from their roster to bring to the venue. If we like the show, then I submit a "formal offer" with the payment details, dates and times we've agreed upon. The offer is accepted by the producer or artist's manager and a contract and technical rider are received. The technical rider is imperative for The Sharon staff to know what the artist needs to present their show in our venue. Lighting, projections, sound, set, catering, hotel accommodations and more are all listed in the technical rider. Once the ink is dried on the contract and rider, we announce the show online and sell tickets two months prior to the show arriving.

Q. How do the three venues differ from one another?

A. The Sharon and Savannah Center are "road houses" and the Studio is a "production house," which means the road houses are venues that host performances currently touring through Florida or the U.S. The Studio, as a production house, is a direct product of what we put into it in the October-April season. The scripts are chosen by The Sharon and Studio staff. The set, costumes, lights and sound are all designed and built



CHICAGO

Sept. 24 & 26, 7:30 p.m. | Sept. 25, 3 & 8 p.m.

The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center

For tickets, visit thevillagesentertainment.com

by Sharon and Studio staff. All roles are cast by the Studio staff, and we host national auditions to cast each season.

One main difference with The Sharon and Savannah Center are the rigging capabilities at The Sharon. Because we have an electronic fly system, we can host shows with large sets that fly in and out. Most Broadway tours need this system in venues in order to execute their performances. The Savannah Center also gets to host the community theater that residents perform and produce.

Q. What are you most proud of?

A. I'm proud of the response the residents have given us. We host approximately 125 performances a year and people really do come out to see the live concerts, theater, orchestras, dance and comedians. They really show they care and love to be entertained. I know Brian sees the same great big crowds at Savannah Center as we do at The Sharon, and it's nice to see people responding and enjoying what we're offering here in The Villages. We sometimes book shows 18 to 24 months down the road, and when the show finally gets here, it's rewarding to see the town enjoy it.

Q. Tell us what's in the works and what you and the staff are excited about.

A. At The Sharon, we are starting season 2018-19, which is our fourth season of hosting entertainment. We are excited to work with our promoters who bring in concerts year-round. We've established some very strong connections with them as they frequent the building bringing in top-quality artists. We are excited to welcome some new ushers this fall — after their training. And we're excited to fill the building again after a long July full of theatergoers!