

AUDITORIUM PHOTO COURTESY PEACE CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
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Patrons enjoy the elegant interior of the Peace Center Concert Hall. Inset photo: a scene from *Hairspray*.

A Vision Realized

The Peace Center Celebrates 15 Years of Performances

By Aïda Rogers

When people talk about the Peace Center in Greenville, “visionary” is a word they use a lot. “Leadership” is another one; “philanthropic” and “extraordinary” crop up too.

One you don’t hear is “debt-free,” although that probably feels a lot better to the 35 people it employs. And it’s true, too: This \$34-million, 140,000-square-foot performing arts center is solvent, and happily so since Sally Jessy Raphael helped christen it November 30, 1990. Celebrating its 15th year, the center is a testament to the citizens who believed a state-of-the-art performance hall, built in a decaying section of downtown, could revive a struggling Main Street. Oh, how right they were.

“There are some nights in the summertime on the weekend when you’re walking down the street,

you think it’s as busy as New York,” says Hayne Hipp, chairman of the Peace Center’s Board of Trustees. People stroll the two-mile length of Greenville’s much-lauded Main Street, trying to decide which of the 85 within-walking-distance restaurants to choose, gazing at sidewalk sculptures, wandering through the newly redone Falls Park on the Reedy. They present their tickets at the Peace Center for the Performing Arts, where 25 to 35 events are presented each year. Flashy Broadway musicals, serious classical concerts, solo performances—Bill Cosby, Willie Nelson—draw 200,000 people a year from this state and beyond.

“It’s been a wonderful renaissance,” Hipp observes. “The business community, the folks who live here and local governments, particularly the city government, really focused on bringing downtown Greenville back to what it was in the ’40s and ’50s.” It was a 20- to 25-year process that started with the

construction of the Hyatt on North Main, followed by the creation of Heritage Green (the Greenville County Museum of Art, The Greenville County Library) farther south. When the Peace family gave \$10 million to start the center that would bear their name, the revitalization spread even farther down Main. Today, The Peace Center is at the portal of the West End, Greenville's eclectic, SoHo-ish district. But there wasn't much desirable about it then.

For Hipp, a native who left Greenville in 1962, today's downtown is gapingly different from when he returned in the early '70s. "It would never have occurred to us to do anything downtown. There was one restaurant and the stores had moved out to the malls." He and Peace Center president Megan Riegel believe that while the Peace family gift and funds from city and county government got the center built, the generosity of the citizenry keeps it going.

"It's the community that sustains it," Riegel upholds. She's fast to note that city and county taxes do not support the center's operations, but that individuals and corporations do. Seventy percent of the monies to build the center came from the private sector. "It's the community that puts forth that \$1.2 million to keep us going each year." Her opinion? "I think over the years the Peace Center has become more meaningful to a lot of people. Some people are going to give money even though they're not going to come to the show. And corporations say this is such an important tool for recruiting employees out of town."

Riegel is one who uses "visionary" when recounting the Peace Center's birth and the people who made it happen. The idea to take a six-acre plot at the corner of Main and Broad streets and not destroy the three historic, crumbling buildings there was prescient, she believes. "Campus" is how staffers refer to the center now, with its main performance hall, 1,000-seat DowBrands Amphitheatre and other buildings. The old Sauer's building, where Duke's Mayonnaise was made, is now the Wyche Pavilion, an open-air brick structure for receptions on the banks of Reedy. The Roe Coach Factory, where wagons were built for the Confederate Army, is home to Larkin's on the River, a restaurant that serves after every show and Sundays, as well as lunch and dinner through the week. Meanwhile, two companies plus the center's administrative office operate within the old Huguenot textile mill. "A beautiful blend of old and new," is how Riegel describes it.

Six companies rent space in the complex, providing six percent, or \$400,000 a year, to offset the Peace Center's costs. Making space available for leasing was just as "brilliant," Riegel says, as not razing the old buildings. "Very smart, very shrewd, *goood*

decisions. That would be another \$400,000-plus a year we'd have to raise through contributions."

A development team raises money for the Peace Center, a nonprofit organization that benefits from a healthy endowment. Founders realized early that ticket sales and contributions wouldn't cover operating costs, so with another \$10 million from the Peace family, an endowment was started. When Riegel came in 1994, the endowment was about \$6.5 million. Today it's \$20 million. That means making repairs and buying the latest stage equipment aren't delayed.

There's certainly nothing chintzy here. The stage of the Peace Concert Hall, at 58-by-44 feet, is the largest fine arts stage in the state, says Kim Cochran-Price, media relations manager. The elaborate *Phantom of the Opera* was performed here with little trouble for four weeks in 2003. But maybe the most noticeable—and pleasing—feature for the public is the seats. They're roomy. Cushy. You're not cramped. Not so in New York, Riegel says. "It's like being on a commercial airliner. They've crammed so many seats you can't move. You're miserable, you're uncomfortable and you've paid a hundred bucks for your ticket." The highest ticket here is \$72, and that's for a Broadway production. And it's just as good—because it's the same, she maintains—as the shows in New York.

Fiscal and physical comfort are two reasons why programming is successful. "When I tell my colleagues what we're doing here and the size of our community [60,000 in the city; 400,000 in the county as of 2003], they're absolutely blown away. If you take a look at our programming versus the programming in the big cities, they're virtually identical."

Within recent years, shows that played in Charlotte began stopping here before heading to Atlanta. Before, Greenville was about three years behind those markets, Cochran-Price notes. "Greenville is the smallest city in the market to have a performing arts center of this caliber," she says, explaining that it's in the same consortium with Lincoln Center, Cleveland Playhouse Square and TPAC in Nashville.

The Peace Center wasn't built strictly for traveling shows, but for the many performing arts groups here. It's home to five resident companies. The Greenville Symphony Orchestra and the Greenville Chorale perform in the 2,100-seat Peace Concert Hall. The South Carolina Children's Theatre and the GSO's chamber ensembles perform in the 400-seat Gunter Theater, named for the late Dorothy Hipp Gunter, who gave \$3 million for its creation. The Carolina Ballet Theatre and International Ballet perform in both halls. The stages in each have a "sprung" floor—rubberized beneath the hardwood—which creates a "springy" feeling for dancers.



*An exuberant dance scene from **Movin' Out**, a musical by Billy Joel and Twyla Tharp. Inset photo: Larry Gatlin in **The Will Rogers Follies**. Both shows are part of the center's upcoming Broadway Series.*

The center is just as busy in the daytime. During the school year, about 70,000 students from the upstate and parts of Georgia and North Carolina participate in the Peace Outreach Program, or POP! Their teachers have prepped them, thanks to study guides created by POP! staff. "It opens a whole new world for these kids," says Jean Scales Toole, a drama and chorus teacher at Liberty High School. Over the years her students have seen Marcel Marceau, The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Chanticleer and The Vienna Boys Choir. English classes have seen Shakespeare productions and Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Frequently a Q&A session follows between students and performers. Likewise, Peace Center performers visit the schools. Toole remembers when soprano Sarah Reese sang for her students. "She dispelled all the myths and stereotypes about opera singers. They thought she'd be snooty, but she was so real and down-to-earth. They really enjoyed it."

Those experiences leave their imprint. Meredith Diebold, a former actor now working as merchandise manager for the Broadway musical *Wicked*, says the Alvin Ailey dancers captivated her. "I had never been exposed to the thrilling African and American influ-

ences they displayed," she remembers now. "It opened my eyes to other areas of dance and gave me a new respect for different art forms."

That determination to reach out to everybody has been a Peace Center hallmark from its inception. Even the architects were told how important it was for the building to not evoke a sense of elitism. "People constantly tell us how much they love that building," says architect Ron Geyer, who oversaw the project for Craig Gaulden Davis, a Greenville firm.

Today, when TV reporters come to town, they do their stand-ups in front of the Peace Center, Geyer notes. It's become a Greenville landmark, reflective of its founders' desire to be inclusive to all.

"One of the things we joke about is the Peace Center has never won an architecture award, but it's been on the cover of Greenville's phone book three times," Geyer says. "It sort of has a populist appeal." ❖

The Peace Center for the Performing Arts will celebrate its 15th year December 1-3 with concerts by swing band Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, a capella group Measure by Measure, an open house and tours. For details, call (864) 467-3000 or (800) 888-7768; www.peacecenter.org.