

Soo Theatre Project

Contributed by Kayla Robertson
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Downtown Sault Sainte Marie is home of the Soo Theatre Project: a historical theatre on Ashmun Street. From 1974 to 1998, the Soo Theatre was a popular "dollar show" style theatre that was divided into two sections (known as a red/blue theatre) by a cement wall so that two movies could play concurrently. Five people were at the final showing of "The Wizard of Oz" in 1998. For the subsequent seven years, the theater sat dark and empty. In the early months of 2005 volunteers began to tear the wall down. The group filled twenty-four dumpsters with rubble before the two theatres were joined again. In the summer of 2005, the Soo Theatre Project put on its debut performance.

The building is still a work in progress. There is insulation visible in some areas of the ceiling, there isn't any heat or house lights, and the paint is in desperate need of attention. However, the volunteers are very interested in restoring the building, not starting over. Even the mirror in the lobby is original. The theatre has a lot of potential; the stage is forty-two feet high with wonderful acoustics, there are two studios (with more on the way), and a dance studio.

Restoration is a long process because of the lack of resources. Michigan is economically crippled and can't provide the proper funding. The theatre relies mainly on volunteers and donations. For example, the seats and stage lights in the theatre were donated by the Mackinac Crossings Theater.

The Soo Theatre Project also relies on their classes to pay for renovations. The S.T.A.R.S. program offers classes such as vocal lessons, jazz ensembles, yoga, ballet, and various other dance, music, and theatre courses.

Currently, the theatre is working to restore the upstairs (formerly apartments) to create several new studios. This will allow the theatre to take in more students and generate funds for new projects. One complaint from many patrons is the lack of a sound system, though it appears that several projects have priority over a sound system.

"They did a good job for amateurs. It would have been better if the sound had been better in the first act," said Arnett Maurer, a Sault Ste. Marie local in attendance.

The cast had about eight weeks to prepare the satirical work honoring Mark Twain. Twain was played by Roger Norton, a former teacher and principal at Sault High School. He played the part well, given his lack of experience. His accent sounded authentic but was easy to understand. While a few players stumbled for their lines, the overall production was successful and warmly accepted by the audience.

Although the play didn't exactly follow Twain's style of satire, it had a fair amount of political and social humor. One scene gave an anecdote about a long lost kingdom in which a king picked a donkey as his chief of state; the cast made sure to let the audience know that it still proves true, most chiefs of state are asses, even today. The writer often "drove" points into the audience rather than simply suggesting a corruption through a story and letting the audience conclude. Also, Mark Twain was made to look like an insensitive man whose sense of humor gave him a strong, if not somewhat repulsive, arrogance. The satirical value of the performance was a bit of a let down solely because Twain was such a master of satire. The show contained too many cheap laughs to fully honor Mark Twain's witty sense of humor.

The scenes seemed to be a bit weakly linked and some served little point at all. For example a scene involving Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer and their cures for warts, the scene seemed detached from the rest of the piece. Other scenes like the French duel, the legend of Sagenfeld, and the fable of Saint Patrick were given very short lead-ins and were seemingly unrelated.

Despite a perhaps less-than-accurately-represented view of Mark Twain's humor, the experience was interesting. The cast did a nice job of playing their characters and performed very well. The theatre alone is enough of a reason to see a performance there. Because the theatre has no heat, this weekend was the theatre's last show. However, October 26th and 27th the Soo Theatre Project hosts a Halloween event. Be sure to check it out. The website, www.sotheatre.org, is frequently updated and will have information about the event.