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Majestic Theater's Assistant Tech Director Bob Brown lead a tour of the theater for attendees of a recent theater conference.

History and performance come together at theater conference

BY JESSICA RUDY
For the Gettysburg Times

Operators of historical theaters from across the country gathered in historic Gettysburg this week to share stories and expertise, and generate energy to advocate for performing arts.

Gettysburg's Majestic Theater hosted the spring regional conference of the League of Historic American Theatres (LHAT) Tuesday and Wednesday, in the process welcoming more than 80 performing arts professionals from theaters of all sizes. Speakers included experts from Broadway and Disney Theatrical Group, as well as Jeffrey Gabel, founding executive director of the Majestic Theater.

"We are proud to be your conference host and it's most appropriate because the Majestic is a 'shining example' of the value of being a member of the league," said Gabel in his opening remarks. He is immediate past president of the league.

Gabel recounted the Majestic's heritage for attendees. Built in 1925 as part of the adjacent Hotel Gettysburg, the movie house screened silent films before converting to "talkies." In 1983, a fire ravaged the hotel, and though the blaze did not close the Majestic, the venue lost much of its luster after being converted to a triplex cinema. When Gettysburg College purchased the hotel, and later reopened the hotel in 1991, they acquired the

theater as part of the deal.

The Majestic's own \$16.5 million restoration was completed in 2005 and since then, the theater has hosted live performances, Sunderman Conservatory concerts, 16,800 film showings, contributed to local economic development, and hosted community fundraisers for local nonprofits.

Embracing the unique history of theaters like the Majestic and in turn spurring economic development in communities was a major theme of the conference. LHAT Executive Director Ken Stein fully illuminated that connection in a presentation on the advantages enjoyed by historic theaters.

While theaters have potential to produce dozens of full-time jobs and significant tax revenues for state and local government, Stein encouraged participants to think beyond the hard data.

"Your historical theater is your advantage in the community," said Stein.

He recounted his experience as executive director of the Paramount Theatre in Austin, Texas. The theater is located next door to the State Theatre, but when he came on board, the Paramount was thriving while the State failed — even though they were managed by the same company. The Paramount used its historic spaces well, while the State tried to force New York-style shows onto its stage.

"One embraced its history and one walked away," said Stein summing up

the results of a patron survey exploring the differences between the two theaters. "Don't make the mistake of thinking you're the only one who loves your theaters," counseled Stein. "Your history is part of the show."

Keynote speaker Randy Cohen, vice president of Research and Policy at Americans for the Arts, took Stein's advice one step further. Not only do historic theaters thrive thanks to nostalgia and memory, but also because of economic impact.

Americans for the Arts produced "Arts and Economic Prosperity 5" in June 2017, which explored how arts institutions benefited their local communities in Pennsylvania. Cohen, who lives a few hours from Gettysburg, said he is a member of the Majestic Theater and comes to shows several times per year.

Not only do people buy tickets, he explained, but they also spend money at restaurants, hotels and gift shops.

"There's lots of economic activity related to this event," he said.

According to Cohen, in 2015 there were 195 arts-related businesses in Adams County employing 507 people. That same year in Pennsylvania, \$1.8 billion was spent by arts organizations and \$1.6 million was spent by audiences.

Charts and data for Pennsylvania and other states are available at www.americansforthearts.org.

Cohen also reminded attendees of the importance of arts education in

producing creativity — a skill highly valued by employers.

"The Majestic is building a healthier Gettysburg," Cohen said after his presentation.

Conference attendees were amazed by the restoration of the Majestic Theater and its proximity to a great intersection of American history.

"I think it's fantastic to bring it to Gettysburg," said Dana Amendola, vice president of Operations at Disney Theatrical Group and a member of the LHAT board. "More people came than (organizers) expected. It didn't surprise me at all."

Amendola characterized the Majestic as "incredible" and noted Gettysburg was a perfect setting to discuss historic theaters.

"When you work for Disney, your chief job is to tell a story," said Amendola. "Theater and history go hand in hand, people want to know the story that's happening behind the scenes. In Gettysburg, it's not about dates and figures anymore."

Fellow Broadway veteran and LHAT board member Bill Register, vice president of operations at Netherland Producing Co. of America, was grateful for the chance to chat with other theater pros in Gettysburg.

"The theater is so beautiful," Register said. "This is a great group of passionate arts managers. We get bogged down in the every day. (The conference) is like group therapy. There's power in numbers."