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Sangamon Auditorium, PCCC to offer rival Broadway series

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From the Montagues and Capulets to the Sharks and Jets, the history of theater is thick with rivalries. Now Sangamon Auditorium and the Prairie Capital Convention Center are getting in on the act.

Springfield's two biggest indoor performance venues will offer competing slates of Broadway shows next season.

That means local theatergoers will have at least nine musicals to choose from, ranging from classics such as "Fiddler on the Roof" and "A Chorus Line" to modern hits like "Monty Python's Spamalot" and "Spring Awakening."

The change is a result of Sangamon Auditorium's decision to end its relationship with Theatre Council Productions, which has produced and marketed the Broadway series at the University of Illinois Springfield since 2005. Beginning with the upcoming season, the auditorium will book such shows on its own.

Theatre Council, however, did not want to lose its foothold in the market, so it made a deal with the PCCC to present shows there.

Sangamon Auditorium executive director Bob Vaughn said the agreement with Theatre Council — which was already in place when Vaughn took over in 2006 — was "pretty favorable for the contractor."

With the increased budget pressures on state universities in recent years, Vaughn decided Sangamon Auditorium needed more of the profits from its Broadway shows.

"The most obvious area to recoup some of that from another revenue source was to cease the arrangement with the Theatre Council," Vaughn said.

Adam Epstein, the president and owner of Theatre Council Productions, said, until his company was brought in, Sangamon Auditorium had a hard time getting Broadway shows at a price that allowed for a profit.

"It was extremely risky and it took a lot of time and we hired people to help manage the series, and in one year, we turned it around," Epstein said. "We created a profitable, audience-friendly series where the number of season-ticket holders went from about 150 to 650 in the first year, and it grew from there."

However, Epstein said Vaughn let it be known at the end of last season that he had no desire to continue the relationship.

"We were hurt by it," Epstein said. "They were in essence — by not renewing our lease — attempting to take our business that we had created in Springfield, because they controlled the real estate."

Vaughn sees things differently. He noted that Sangamon Auditorium has been presenting Broadway shows in Springfield for 30 years.

"We didn't think that a contractor owned the market," he said. "So if they decide to go to Prairie Capital and do a series, then there's nothing I can do about it."

But can Springfield sustain two series of Broadway shows?

"I don't know," Vaughn said. "I didn't choose to do it. If it were up to me, I wouldn't have two series, but that's out of my control. Prairie Capital has to make that decision."

Brian Oaks, general manager of the PCCC, said he also doesn't know if Springfield will support two Broadway series.

"That's something, I think, that Theatre Council had to look at when they were trying to decide whether to continue their Broadway in Springfield," he said. "Obviously, by coming to the Convention Center, they felt like there was adequate business to be able to continue a profitable and successful series here."

The convention center isn't assuming any risk on the Broadway shows, Oaks said, because Theatre Council is essentially renting the venue for the performances.

"There's a flat fee that the convention center is getting, and then you'll potentially get a back-end profit for the convention center based on how well the shows do," Oaks said.

Epstein declined to get into detail about Theatre Council's deal with the convention center, saying the arrangements have not been finalized.

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Upcoming Broadway series in Springfield

Theatre Council Productions at the Prairie Capital Convention Center

- "Fiddler on the Roof," Oct. 17
- "Grease," Dec. 7
- "The Color Purple," Jan. 24, 2011
- "Monty Python's Spamalot," May 17, 2011

Sangamon Auditorium

- "A Chorus Line," Nov. 2
- "Spring Awakening," Nov. 14*
- "Legally Blonde," Dec. 6
- "Riverdance," Feb. 13, 2011
- "Mamma Mia," March 11-12, 2011

*"Spring Awakening" is subject to change.

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