



Brian Mackey: UIS wins local Broadway tug-of-war

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Will Springfield support two competing Broadway series?

When Broadway in Springfield announced this week that it would move its remaining shows from the Prairie Capital Convention Center to Sangamon Auditorium and exit the market at the end of the season, that question seemed to have been answered with a clear “no.”

That was the conclusion of Todd Rossi, an executive with the series.

“It’s been a little bit tougher than anyone would have liked as far as overall sales,” he said.

The reality, however, is more complicated.

The failure of the Broadway in Springfield series appears to come down not to the appetite for theater among the people of Springfield but instead to the cost of trying to stage a theatrical show in a multi-purpose arena.

The series was created by Chicago-based Theatre Council Productions, which had programmed the Broadway series at Sangamon Auditorium from 2005 through last season.

Last year, Sangamon Auditorium management decided it wanted more of the profits from the Broadway shows and took the booking and production duties in-house.

“I do value their role in small markets, but we just don’t need that since I came on board here,” said Bob Vaughn, the director of Sangamon Auditorium. He used to program the Broadway series at his previous job, and so “with the cuts in state appropriations and the economy,” he felt he couldn’t go on sharing profits with an outside promoter.

Not wanting to give up the years it had invested in Springfield, Theatre Council decided to continue its series under the Broadway in Springfield name. It entered an agreement to rent space at the convention center.

That proved to be an expensive decision.

Staging theater in a venue like Sangamon Auditorium is comparatively easy: curtains and a rigging system are already in place. When a show rolls into town, it’s a matter of building the sets, flying the curtains and lights and running the show. At the PCCC, however, no such infrastructure exists.

“The shows just didn’t seem to be working the way they had hoped here,” said PCCC general manager Brian Oaks. “I think they were incurring more costs than they expected.”

“Fiddler on the Roof,” originally scheduled to open the season, had to be postponed for the better part of a year because tour officials determined there was not time between the previous day’s show and the curtain time to safely complete the complicated load-in.

But the Broadway in Springfield series was not a complete failure. A decent number of people came to see “The Color Purple” at the PCCC in January.

Workers had done a nice job transforming the PCCC into a theater-like venue, and the sound was impeccable.

But more important than any of that was the choice of show: “The Color Purple” was new to Springfield, something different in a town that too often sees touring shows recycled. (This weekend’s three performances of “Mamma Mia!” at Sangamon Auditorium come to mind.)

What else could explain why the organizers pulled the plug on “Grease” a week before it was to have opened at the PCCC? Numbers were not released, but at a meeting of the Springfield Metropolitan Exposition and Auditorium Authority, PCCC box office manager Jenny Vaughn said ticket sales had been low. The show has been performed numerous times by local companies, including just last summer at the Hoogland Center for the Arts.

People will turn out for a show if it’s interesting and different. The good news is that people who had planned on seeing Broadway in Springfield’s two remaining shows at the PCCC will still get to see them, just at a different venue.

Because the company was just renting space at the PCCC, Oaks said the PCCC had no financial interest in the shows beyond the rent it would have collected and concessions it sells at bigger shows.

“Part of our job as a venue is to try and work with our promoters — to make sure that their business model is able to work as it needs to,” Oaks said.

“Monty Python’s Spamalot,” set for May 17, is new to the market. “Fiddler on the Roof,” set for June 20, is a less interesting choice — it’s been done countless times by local community theater groups — but perhaps the presence of Chatham resident John Preece in the lead role of Tevye will boost attendance.

The times, dates and ticket prices are to remain the same at Sangamon Auditorium.

If those shows are a success — especially “Spamalot,” which has never been staged in Springfield — it speaks well for the future of touring Broadway productions in this town.

Indeed, even though Springfield will be back to just one Broadway series, at Sangamon Auditorium, Bob Vaughn said he expected to have six such shows next year, up from four this season. Because the contracts had not yet been finalized, he was not ready to announce the titles.

Vaughn said the season would include more “art” programming — in other words, more modern shows like “Spring Awakening,” and fewer warhorses such as “Grease.”

Now, go see “Spamalot” or I shall taunt you a second time.

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