

Off, Off, Off

HISTORIC STAGE: The 19th-century Ivoryton Playhouse has a venerable heritage. "This is the first stage that Katharine Hepburn performed on, and the last stage that Marlon Brando performed on," says Jacqueline Hubbard, the theater's executive artistic director. Photo by Caryn B. Davis

Seasons of
Connecticut

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Broadway

Written by **Lori Miller Kase**

The third smallest state in the nation, Connecticut is a star on the national theater scene, scooping up Tony Awards and launching the careers of actors including Michael Douglas. Here, Seasons shines a spotlight on some of the theatrical institutions in small towns and suburbs that enrich Connecticut's reputation as an artistic tour de force

Bordering one end of the idyllic campus of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford are a series of candy-colored cottages named for some of the playwrights and actors who got their start here along Connecticut's shoreline: Wendy Wasserstein, August Wilson, Michael Douglas. "I like to call us the launch pad of American theater," says Preston Whiteway, executive director of The O'Neill. "This is where plays and musicals begin their lives before they go on to Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, London and around the world."

Connecticut may be only a stone's throw from the Great White Way, but theater fans do not need to travel to New York to find quality theater. Our tiny state boasts five Tony Award-winning theaters, including the only two regional theaters in the country to have won two Tonys — The O'Neill and The Goodspeed. "Connecticut is culturally and theatrically very very rich — especially for such a small state," says Mike Stotts, managing director of Hartford Stage, another Tony winner. "Many larger states don't have nearly the artistic output we have here."

Connecticut cities, of course, offer an abundance of theatrical options, like Hartford Stage, TheaterWorks and The Bushnell in the capital, and Yale Repertory Theater, Long Wharf Theatre and Shubert Theatre in New Haven. While TheaterWorks serves up mostly contemporary plays in a smaller, more intimate setting, often producing pieces recently seen in New York, Hartford Stage provides everything from Shakespeare to newly-commissioned plays to musicals like the four-time Tony-award winning *Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, which it premiered (in 2012) and then exported to Broadway in 2013. The Long Wharf and Yale Rep, the two other major urban producing theaters, are also known for staging and commissioning new work. And most national tours of Broadway shows pass through The Bushnell or the Shubert.

Yet beyond the state's urban centers, tucked into rural Connecticut towns and suburbs are several smaller, often historic, theaters that are also attracting big talent and producing — and even originating — important works. Proximity to New York means access to top talent — all of the professional theaters in the area cast both locally and in NYC, which means Connecticut theatergoers are able to see Broadway and Off Broadway performers in their own backyards. Here, *Seasons* takes a look at some of the rural and suburban theaters playing leading roles in the state's thriving theater scene:

The Goodspeed Opera House

Perched on the edge of the Connecticut River in East Haddam, the picturesque Goodspeed Opera House has been showcasing new — and newly revived — musicals for more than half a century. "We have had for our entire history a singular mission," says Michael Gennaro, executive director of the

theater: "to produce, refresh, and reinvent American musical theater."

Since opening in 1963, the Goodspeed has mounted 250 musicals, including more than 70 world premieres. Many of these, including *Annie*, *Man of La Mancha*, *All Shook Up* and 20 have gone on to Broadway. And Broadway has come to the Goodspeed as well: Idina Menzel, Kristin Chenoweth, and Sutton Foster are among the big-name musical theater divas who have graced The Goodspeed's stage.

The Goodspeed is also dedicated to developing musical theater talent, according to Gennaro, through its Festival of New Musicals, its Johnny Mercer Colony for musical theater lyricists, composers, and script writers, and writers' residencies. "I think part of our responsibility in line with our mission is to create the next generation of musical theater artists," Gennaro says.

The Goodspeed stages performances in two different spaces — the main, Victorian-style Opera House in East Haddam and The Terris Theatre in Chester. This season blends what Gennaro calls "tried and true classic musicals" and new works. Among the theaters' offerings this summer: two classic musicals — *Anything Goes* and *Bye Bye Birdie*, and two new musicals. "We're producing five shows, but probably working with and developing another 20 every year," notes Gennaro.

Sharon Playhouse

A small theater nestled in the Northwest Hills is also doing its part to contribute to the musical theater landscape. The historic red barn that houses the Sharon Playhouse has served as a theater since the 1930s, but the works being produced on its stages today hew toward the contemporary. "Theaters tend to take on a little bit of the personality of the artists who inhabit them, and my personal directing passion is new musicals," says John Simpkins, the theater's artistic director for the past five years. "We've helped develop a few of those that we haven't taken into production, and once a summer we take a new musical all the way through [to presenting it for an audience]."

Simpkins says he wants Sharon Playhouse, which predominantly presents summer stock, to "be a home theater for people who live in our region." He is committed to presenting a variety of shows to appeal to all his patrons. This season, for example, includes the classic Stephen Sondheim musical *Gypsy*, *Quartet*, a play about aging opera singers, and *Judge Jackie Justice*, a relatively new musical comedy by the up-and-coming musical writing duo Michael Kooman and Christopher Dimond.

Simpkins, who taught musical theater at New York University for 14 years and now heads up musical theater at Pennsylvania State University, says that education is also an integral part of Sharon's mission. He likens the Playhouse to a teaching hospital. "We are a teaching theater that gives



HEAD FOR THE HILLS: In summer, Sharon Playhouse lures theater-goers to Northwest Connecticut for contemporary musicals. Photo courtesy of Sharon Playhouse

really great theater and really great training.” In that spirit, the theater offers internships to students pursuing degrees in design and technical theater, and hosts a collegiate company that performs in the ensembles of the bigger musicals. The rest of the casts are comprised of a mix of professional actors from New York as well as local talent.

“We want to be a place on the national landscape where theater artists know they can come and be respected as artists and for the work they make,” says Simpkins. “There is something very special about the vibe of the Playhouse. We’ve had a bunch of really credentialed Broadway folks come and play with us in the summer.”

Ivoryton Playhouse

Stepping into the Ivoryton Playhouse, located in the tiny Essex village of Ivoryton, is like stepping back into theater history. Black and white portraits of the many stars who have appeared on the Ivoryton stage over the course of the past century adorn the walls of the 19th-century revival-style theater, among them, Helen Hayes, Art Carney, Alan Alda,

and Shelley Winters. “This is the first stage that Katharine Hepburn performed on, and the last stage that Marlon Brando performed on,” notes Jacqueline Hubbard, the theater’s executive/artistic director. “Bringing people in here is not about just keeping theater alive – it’s about keeping an important part of Connecticut history alive.”

The oldest continually-running self-supporting summer theater in the country, The Ivoryton evolved into a year-round theater during Hubbard’s tenure. “When I came to Essex I had two young children,” recalls Hubbard, who had previously been an actress and an English teacher. “I saw that this place was empty for nine months of the year, and I knocked on the door and asked if I could start a children’s theater.” Over the years, the children’s theater Hubbard started grew into a couple of community musical productions a year. She started adding cabarets – “just to see if people were interested and would come out during the year.” They were – and they did. Hubbard eventually joined the Ivoryton’s board of trustees, was named artistic director several years later, and in 2006, the theater began producing a year-round

season (April to November) of professional theater under her direction. “The main thing for me was to make sure that the theater was high quality, affordable, and what people wanted to see.”

The challenge? To engage all different patrons. “We have come up with a sort of template that works for us: People want musicals – so we do the big musicals in the summer when we have the biggest audiences, and our older patrons really like the bio kind of shows, so we do those during the year. If I want an element of drama, I have to have something else in it – this year I chose *Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks*, a poignant story between an older widow and younger dance instructor, which includes dance.” Summer musicals including *Chicago* and *Rent* and “bio” shows about musicians John Denver and Rosemary Clooney –will bookend the season.

Another challenge for the theater is housing – most of the theater’s cast members come up to Ivoryton from New York. “By the good graces of this town, we have actors stashed like sardines all over the place.” But Hubbard says she makes sure her actors have a positive experience at Ivoryton – in fact, she says, many have worked there more than once and are “cheerleaders” for the Playhouse back in the city. She said that seeing a show at a intimate theater like the Ivoryton is a special treat for audience members as well.

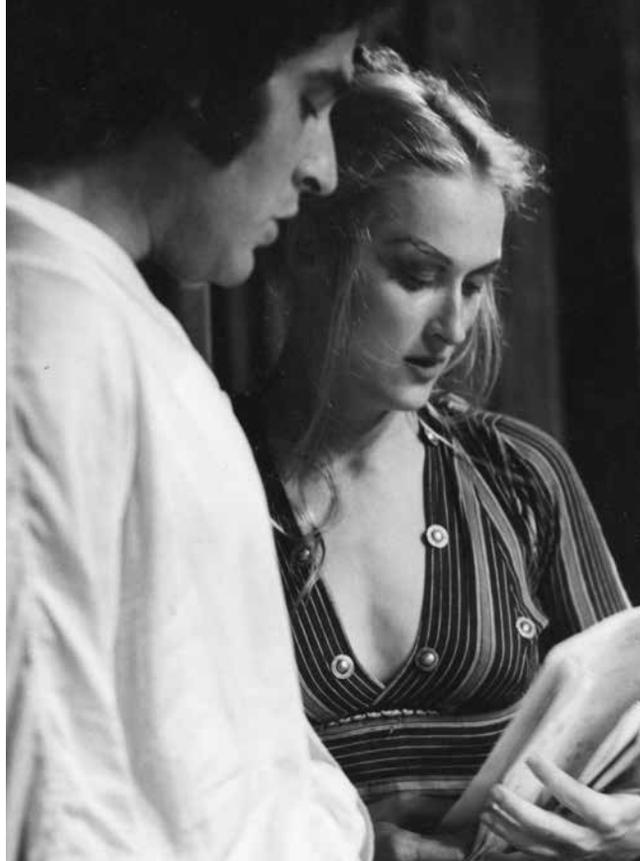
“When we take a big musical and we reduce it down onto a small stage, you will get a completely different experience,” says Hubbard. “I had so many people who came to see *Memphis* last year who had seen it on Broadway and said that the performance here resonated with them in a totally different way – because instead of it being a spectacle that they were watching, they felt a part of the experience.”

Playhouse on Park

At 7-year-old Playhouse on Park in West Hartford, a relative newcomer to Connecticut’s professional theater scene, each of the theater’s 160 seats is close to the stage. “Our mission is to fully immerse the audience into the world of the play, having them experience the play through perhaps a different lens than they have previously, because our space is very intimate,” says Sean Harris, artistic director. “You’re seeing the actors sweat, and you’re seeing them cry. You can see subtly in their performances.”

Harris says he and his co-founders – co-artistic director Darlene Zoller and executive director Tracy Flater – do not believe in casual theater; they want audience members to leave the theater feeling that they have been engaged. “I don’t want anyone leaving saying ‘That was okay,’ or ‘I don’t know how I feel about that.’ Harris explains. “They don’t have to say ‘That was great’ (even though we get that a lot) – it would be great if they said ‘I was so angry’ or ‘That was so unsettling.’”

Harris, who teaches theater at Hall High School says he



FIRST ACT: Many well-known actors, including Meryl Streep, began their careers at The O’Neill. Photo by A. Vincent Scarano

had always dreamed of opening his own theater, but admits that when Playhouse on Park first opened in 2009 in the shadow of Hartford Stage and TheaterWorks, someone told him the theater was doomed. Harris says the Playhouse is committed to keeping its ticket prices low (between \$10 to \$45), because they want shows to be affordable and accessible for everyone. He also believes that the theater fills a special niche in the region.

“We are creating a performing arts theater,” he says. “We are one of the only regional theaters in the country that has a dance company in residence, we have improv nights, comedy nights, a burlesque show, an education program and a [four to six] play reading series.” Of course, they also offer up a healthy dose of plays and musicals to round out their seasons, which run from December through June and feature a mix of New York and local actors. Coming up this spring and summer: the musical *A Chorus Line*, the Pulitzer-prize winning play *Wit*, and the children’s show *Junie B. Jones*.

Playwrights on Park, the play-reading series, is one of the theater’s newer initiatives, and is “all about the development of the play,” Harris says. By presenting staged readings of new work by emerging and established playwrights, Harris hopes to both focus attention on the writers behind the works and incorporate audiences, who are able to provide feedback, in the development process. “It’s probably our most important choice in programming, because if we don’t support new work, we aren’t supporting new playwrights, and we are just rehashing the pieces that have been done for years.”

The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

Home to the National Playwright Conference and the National Musical Theater Conference, The O'Neill is also devoted to discovering new works and new artists for the stage. In fact, the historic theater, which is over 50 years old, was the first to focus entirely on the development of plays, and originated the model of staged readings, which is now standard practice in theaters across the country. The O'Neill was also the model for Sundance, according to Whiteway. "Robert Redford came here to create for screenwriters what we do for playwrights."

Theatergoers are invited to the campus every June and July to see plays and musicals in their earliest stages of development. "Every reading has an audience, and the audience is the key vital element in the growth of the work," says Whiteway. "It's how the writer discovers what is working and what is not working. The writer oftentimes will completely rewrite a whole act or scene or several musical numbers between readings." Actors perform without costumes, with scripts in hand, and with minimal sets; the focus is on the work itself.

"You as an audience member coming to The O'Neill will never have heard of these shows, and often the actors are new to you," Whiteway says. "But two years from now, you will see these shows in New York and these actors in New York or on television." The Tony Award-winning musicals In

the Heights and Avenue Q both premiered here, as did plays by renowned playwrights like August Wilson, Sam Shepard and John Guare. The conferences are cast professionally out of New York and Los Angeles, but new acting careers are launched here as well — Meryl Streep landed her first professional acting gig at the Waterford theater when she was fresh out of Yale.

The O'Neill also hosts the National Puppetry Conference and the Cabaret & Performance Conference during the summers, and operates a year-round National Theater Institute, which is like a semester abroad for undergraduates devoted to training in acting, writing, directing, design, movement and voice. National Theater of the Deaf was born at The O'Neill; alumni also formed Hollywood-based Deaf West Theatre, which just premiered a highly acclaimed production of *Spring Awakening* on Broadway (which was double cast so that each role had one actor signing and the other speaking and singing).

"When you look at the big picture: the conferences, and Deaf West, and Sundance and play-reading series all over the country," says Whitehead, "the O'Neill's roots and legacy can be felt around the world and in every discipline of theater."



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HILLSTEAD

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FARMINGTON GARDEN CLUB

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