

CEDAR RAPIDS REVIVAL

by Amanda Bjerke

They called it “Iowa’s Katrina.” The media’s catch phrase comparing the heartland’s great flood to New Orleans’ ruinous hurricane was no understatement. In 2008 an unusually wet spring swelled rivers throughout Iowa’s eastern reaches and caused more than \$7 billion in damages. Communities big and small were affected, including Cedar Rapids where a scenic location proved treacherous. The state’s second largest city straddles both sides of the Cedar River. Its city hall, county courthouse and other public offices inhabit an island midstream. A levee built more than 60 years ago was no match for the violent overflow. Estimates placed that structure under five feet of water before the river crested. More than 3,900 homes were ravaged. Government buildings, the downtown and significant cultural landmarks were especially hard hit.



The Iowa Theater intends to reopen in February despite major damage.

Yet, just a year-and-a-half after the tragedy, Cedar Rapids emerges as a bastion of optimism fueled by cooperation and a can-do spirit. Tim Boyle, president of the Cedar Rapids Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, reflects on the situation with a “glass-half-full” perspective. “Yes, it’s true one-seventh of the city was flooded. That means six-sevenths were not. So much of our town didn’t miss a beat. Restaurants, parks, many shopping areas, and our minor league hockey and baseball facilities were totally intact. The segments that were hardest hit are working

diligently to get back on track. The recovery, thus far, has been beyond anyone’s wildest expectations. I always say people are as good as they have to be, and we’ve had to be awfully good in the past year.”

The populace’s mutual benevolence became apparent while the floodwaters were still receding. “Many of our cultural organizations reacted very quickly. They shared locations so they could continue to function,” Boyle said. “Theatre Cedar Rapids is a poster child for the recovery effort. They’ve made amazing progress.”

THEATER IMAGES: ROB MERRITT



A flooded downtown

The amateur theater group possesses a rarified pedigree. Established in 1925 it counts Cedar Rapids’ most famous native son, the artist Grant Wood (*American Gothic*), among its founders. In 1980 it found a permanent home in the Iowa Theater, a 1928 facility that originally hosted vaudeville acts and retained much of its architectural grandeur. After the flood, four feet of water lapped against the 1928 rhinestone Barton organ that remains among its most significant features. The stage and staircases were compromised, the basement inundated. Yet the entire 2008 summer schedule and youth education programs went on at venues scattered across the county.

“We are in an 80-year-old building right in the heart of downtown which was hit the hardest. The wild thing is we never cancelled a program. We moved our summer show into a high school,” Managing Director Casey Prince explained. “The local opera company was intending to do their summer production in our theater. They went into another high school. Weeks after the flood, without the use of our building, we helped get an opera off the ground, ran their box office, and ran our own show. It was *High School Musical*—the perfect feel-good production that put a smile on people’s faces after so many losses. We were able to bring in kids who were affected by the flood and let them have a good time, watching the show for free. Our response after the flood was that we are a community theater, so we’ll take the theater to the community. We went out to schools, the mall. We kept working.”

Within a month of the disaster the theater company joined together with Liars Theater, SPT theater, the Urban Theater Project, and the multi-faceted Legion Arts group to stage an original production about the flood, *Moving Home*. “Dan Bern, an area native who performs all over the place, was asked to write a song for it. He worked with local artist Gerard Estrella and wrote ten. Then he was a balladeer in the play. It tells the stories of the epic flood experience. It was very moving. At one point, during some of the sadder flood stories, a visual artist from Legion Arts created a watercolor painting reflective of those stories, then he took more water and washed it off to reveal a beautiful oil painting underneath. That was the spirit of the show.”

The production ran for a week in July 2008 at Bruce more, a storied historic estate located 20 miles beyond the flood zone. The facility’s executive director produced the show. *Moving Home* earned two Iowa Cultural Corridor Alliance Innovation Excellence awards, the local equivalent of a Tony, and raised \$18,000 for the local Community Foundation’s flood relief coffers.

The Bruce more rallied its support to other organizations as well. Built for the captain of Cedar Rapids’ first major industry, the Sinclair meat packing plant, the 26-acre showcase passed into the hands of the family that gave the world Quaker Oats. It is now owned and operated by the National Historic Trust and serves as a significant community asset. “Our symphony, Orchestra Iowa, operates out of the Paramount Theater and it was completely destroyed,” the convention bureau’s Tim Boyle explained. “They moved to the Bruce more lawn for

the summer seasons of both 2008 and 2009.”

Despite what seemed to be a total loss, Paramount Theater is slated for renovation and the symphony continues to carry out a full winter schedule at Coe College’s Sinclair Auditorium.

Theatre Cedar Rapids anticipates re-opening the Iowa Theater with *The Producers* February 26, 2010. “We were in a unique position regarding recovery because before the flood we already had plans for a capital campaign to renovate the theater. So, we were pretty much a shovel-ready project,” Casey Prince explained. Necessary flood repair swelled the cost from \$2.5 million to more than \$7 million, but Prince said FEMA funding and various grants will make up the difference.

Among Cedar Rapids’ most distinctive attributes, the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library also retains its community presence while contemplating the future. The facility forms a lynchpin for two significant cultural and historic districts. New



A rendering of the Iowa Theater's renovation project

Bohemia was settled in the 1870s on the east side of the river and the Czech Village developed along the west banks in the early 1900s. The deluge swept over both areas and affected many of

the structures, including the museum.

Armed with \$10 million in state funds, the organization is currently restoring the historic Kosek Building in the Czech Village. It will include offices, the museum store and display space. A new exhibition center and research library will follow at a total cost of approximately \$25 million. It’s anticipated that the first phase of construction will be completed in early 2010 and will be heralded with the exhibition, *Rising Above: The Story of a People and the Flood*. In the meantime, some stores have survived and others are reopening in the cultural district. “A surprising variety is open, including a bakery and numerous restaurants,” Leah Wilson, director of marketing and communication of the museum and library, said. “The

Czech Village remains a viable commercial area. Its context makes the museum especially relevant to the community,” she continued. During the restoration projects it’s possible to get a taste of the Czech and Slovak contributions to Cedar Rapids at alternate locations. *Pack Your Bags: A Journey to America*, an overview of the immigrant voyage to the New World and the traditions that continue to mark the Czech-American community is presented free of charge at the Lindale Mall. The Cedar Rapids Museum of Art is the setting for the Czech Museum’s *Treasures From the National Collection*, a compendium of lavish folk costumes, colorful glass, ornate crystal and royal dux porcelain. It also includes a silk screen by Czech-American artist Paul Warhola who is the brother of the more famous Andy Warhol.

Wilson is quick to point out that while Czechs and Slovaks made up a significant percentage of the immigrant population, Cedar Rapids was always a melting pot. Tim Boyle agreed, “If you ran the demographics there are probably as many German and Irish, but the Czech heritage is an important thread running through the fabric of

our community, the restoration efforts made in the Czech Village and New Bohemia are indicative of the overall community spirit,” he said. “We like to tell people, Cedar Rapids is still standing, but we are not standing still. Our cultural organizations still have much to offer, so does the entire community as we move into the 21st century,” Boyle concluded. ■



The staff of the elegant Brucemore mansion rallied to assist the arts

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