

CEO to CEO: Eric White & Craig Hassall of Playhouse Square

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Cleveland's [Playhouse Square](#) is one of the world's premier arts districts, with 11 venues, eight resident companies, and the largest touring Broadway season ticket base in North America. Not to mention street-level dining, office space, a 34-story apartment tower, and the Crowne Plaza Hotel, all of which turned this not just into a theater district, but a hub where many people didn't expect to find one.

Chief among the surprised was Craig Hassall, who joined the venerable Playhouse Square as CEO in 2023 after leading globally renowned venues like London's Royal Albert Hall. Captivated by the mix of historic venues and modern innovation, Hassall brings his unique perspective shaping entertainment experience not just to the organization, but to the broader arts community.

Recently, Hassall sat down with Eric White, CEO of AudienceView, for a discussion about the history of Playhouse Square, Hassall's commitment to broadening arts accessibility, and the operational strategies that can make venues like Playhouse Square not just inviting to the public, but integral to the communities they serve.

For those who aren't familiar with Playhouse Square, can you tell us what it's all about and why you chose to take over after being at some of the largest venues in Europe like the Royal Albert Hall?

Playhouse Square is a collection of theaters in a concentrated downtown area of Cleveland, but it's part of a larger real estate portfolio which enables the entity to effectively control its operations, personality, and destiny. That's my elevator pitch.

What compelled me [to take over] was actually coming here. The theaters are spectacularly opulent and well-maintained, and there's an audience for them. That was the first thing. The second was the attitude of the Board of Trustees. There's this attitude of "We're Cleveland, Ohio, and we'll get stuff done," and they absolutely have. I wasn't helicoptered in to rescue this organization, which I have done before. It was in fine shape when I got here. That was quite inspiring.

Part of it was also just the timing, coming out of Covid. I think we all thought "What else is out there?" Your mind is very open to opportunities. So, I just thought, "What the hell? I've got nothing to lose." And it's the best thing I've ever done.

What's important to you in terms of building on the base of success that Playhouse Square has?

All my life, I've been peddling this barrow of trying to open [the arts] to new audiences, younger people, more diverse audiences, and so on. That's something Playhouse Square does well and could do better. I bet that everyone who reads this who runs a venue has the same aspiration. You want to break the barriers to entry to get people from the outside coming in.

At the Royal Albert Hall, my aim was to make the audience sitting in the seats reflect the people of London. It's the same with Playhouse Square. I would love the people sitting in the seats to reflect the people of Cleveland.

The first step is programming, and that's easy to say, but hard to do. We will always make sure there's a variety of things. If you say you want to program for a more diverse or younger audience, then the Broadway that we have is already there. We're the biggest Broadway market outside of New York City. *Shucked* is a really good show. It's very accessible. & *Juliet* is all pop songs and an approachable story. We did *Six* last year, which is a fabulous show that was good for different ethnicities and a gay audience.

So, programming is key, but programming [alone] isn't the answer, if that makes sense. You've got to have intentionality to give people permission to come, and I don't have the answer to that. I know the problem, but I haven't gotten the solution. It's the same problem I had at the Royal Opera Hall and when I was at Opera Australia at the Sydney Opera House. We have these incredible edifices that are so beautiful and imposing and exclusive and terribly intimidating. We have to find a solution.

The answer, by the way, is not pricing. A young person will pay \$300 for a Taylor Swift ticket, but they won't come to a show on Broadway, so what are we missing? That's the challenge.

[Read our interview about dynamic pricing with Sean Kelly](#)

What kind of outreach do you have to find that new audience? I know you have the Dazzle program with high schools.

This is a very American thing — you do the best high school musicals in the world. I had never seen a high school musical in an American school before I came here and I went and saw three or four around Cleveland and the production quality, the performance quality, the musical quality is incredibly high. [The Dazzle program](#) is like the Tony Awards for high school at Playhouse Square. These young people come in and treat it like prom night. They dress up, it's in a glamorous building, they're all screaming for each other. And the nice thing is that there's a real pipeline to Broadway. The Best Actor and Best Actress go to New York to be part of the Jimmy Awards, and that's a great thing.

Is the goal to just serve Cleveland or Cleveland and places like Toledo or Pittsburgh or even New York?

My longer-term ambition is to make Playhouse Square, and thereby Cleveland, a destination on its own. It's a neighborhood rather than a place. You might have a coffee or a drink or go hear some jazz or hang out on the plaza. You could see a comedian in the Key Bank State theater, you could see the *Neil Diamond Musical* and *Into the Woods*. There are five or six offerings in our complex. The way I describe it is like moving from a timed-ticket mentality to a grazing mentality, and then you've spent two-and-a-half hours wandering around when you hadn't really planned to do anything. What I'd love, if I've done the job well, is for you to think of Cleveland for a mini weekend. You think about that for Nashville and New Orleans, but I don't think

Cleveland's in that choice set yet.

What would you say to people from outside of Cleveland — or even inside of Cleveland — to get them to come visit?

You can't do it in one night. Give it a weekend, because there's so much on offer. And don't just arrive on spec; plan your visit. Book a show and plan your visit around it. What I've loved about being a newcomer to Cleveland is that we're not the only game in town. We have the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame down the road. The art museum is one of the best in the world, and it's free, and the collection is stupendously good. Cleveland Orchestra is one of the top five orchestras on the planet. Having no clue what was here, I was very impressed by the cultural weight of Cleveland. It's pretty amazing.

What are you doing to broaden your audiences and use the theaters for more than just traditional productions?

We had a three-day symposium for young Black entrepreneurs called FutureLAND, which was remarkable. The lobbies were backed with people in seminars looking at AI, Moon landings, Mars walking machines, all sorts of things. It's happened under the radar in the lobbies of the theater.

There's an event called Borderlight, which is a fringe festival and we're working more closely with them to beef it up and make it longer. If you can break up the pattern of a series of Broadway with guerilla events Borderlight, that's fantastic. We also host the Cleveland International Piano Competition, and they do renegade pop-ups all over Cleveland. We program comedians and music acts and various one-nighters which also do incredibly well. Things like that help make the place feel welcome to all.

Do you see these pop-ups as opportunities to use venues in other ways, and is it an economic driver or purely to expand the community?

A bit of both. We have eight resident companies: Cleveland Play House, the Great Lakes Theater, and the City Club, which is sort of a free-speech forum. We'll happily support those companies as they put on shows. A new model we're looking at is what we call affiliate companies. We formed a partnership last year with Karamu House, which is the oldest Black theater company in the country. We're going to commission works together and give them a season here. We don't want to subsume them into us. We want them to have their own identity, but also have a presence here. From a business point of view, we can share contract templates, HR policies, and all these things that you have to have but cost money. If we can help supply some of those things to smaller companies, that's great.

Do you think the Playhouse Square model be copied in other cities, and what advice would you give to people looking to develop it elsewhere?

It's tricky because the assets are superb. Someone 100 years ago built these beautiful theaters and buildings. The West Kowloon Cultural District in Hong Kong is trying to do the same thing and it may succeed, but every building is new. It doesn't have the heritage and feeling of Playhouse Square.

You have to be strategic in your acquisition. You really need to have the end goal in mind. Are you trying to be an entertainment district or a neighborhood? Are there assets that will support that? You can't just be random about it.

And you've got to have a supportive board of trustees. Our motivation is not commercial, it's cultural. Even though you want to make money, the way we interact with tenants or users of the neighborhood is primarily for cultural purposes. And that helps define the personality of the neighborhood in a really good way, I think.