

The Heart of Worcester's Cultural Renaissance: Inside The Hanover Theatre

6 MIN READ



Once a grand vaudeville and movie palace, The Hanover Theatre & Conservatory has become a cornerstone of Worcester's artistic revival.

Since reopening in 2008 after an ambitious restoration, the 2,300-seat venue has grown into much more than just a Broadway house. It now encompasses a vibrant conservatory, offering professional training in dance, acting, music, and design, a black box performance space known as the BrickBox Theater, and one of the few fully unionized repertory theater companies in the region.

In this wide-ranging conversation, Alan Seiffert, who recently took the helm as the organization's president and CEO, reflects on the theater's evolution, the role of the arts in urban redevelopment, the impact of declining public funding, and the exciting new directions that lie ahead—from bold programming choices to a deepened focus on community engagement.

This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Tell us about The Hanover Theatre.

In 1904, the theater began as a beautiful playhouse hosting Broadway touring productions and esteemed performers such as Sarah Bernhardt. By the 1920s, the venue evolved into "Poli's Palace" welcoming a mix of vaudeville and silent films. Later, it was converted into a movie palace, eventually closing as Showcase Cinemas in the late 1990s.

Starting in 2000, a group of committed residents and foundations said, *this was once a beautiful theater, how do we bring it back?* Thanks to their dedication, in 2008, we opened, and we're now a 2,300-seat, beautifully renovated Broadway house including our own Mighty Wurlitzer pipe organ. It is gorgeous inside. We were able to restore all the architecture. During construction there was a chandelier uncovered that had been hidden under paper mâché, caked in dust for decades. They cleaned it and it turned out, it was the original chandelier!??

About eight years ago, we opened our conservatory, so now we offer not just a great theater, but we also offer high quality professional training in dance, music, and design. The Hanover Theatre Conservatory has really added a new life to our organization.

Most recently, we also expanded across the street to a smaller space, the Jean McDonough Arts Center (JMAC), housing an intimate 200-seat black box.

Lastly, about five years ago, we launched a professional repertory theater company, one of the only in central Massachusetts. THT Rep is a fully unionized, fully professional acting company, focused on classics, modern classics, and classics-inspired works.

Can you describe how redevelopment has happened around the theater, where you see it heading, and how declining government arts funding might impact community redevelopment nationally, not just in Worcester?

Worcester is one of the fastest growing areas for redevelopment in this region.

The Hanover Theatre has revitalized Worcester's downtown, and that revitalization continues. It's been exciting for me to witness. Where I think we are heading is towards more growth as a cultural hub, but more significantly towards a desire for strong artistic experiences that benefit the community and offer a place for people to connect in real life.

Theaters are competing now with screens more than anything else, so offering up a place that you can go to and experience something wonderful and exciting with essentially your neighbors and others around you, that has shown to really help communities build.?

It always has been important to help build communities and help build downtowns. In this current time, that is even more important.

Our mission is "to ignite and nurture a passion for the performing arts in audiences and artists of today and tomorrow." I would add to that and say our responsibility is to share meaningful works that impact you even if you argue with it. That is so critical. For some organizations, the government's change in perspective and the change in funding is going to be challenging, and I'm hopeful that these great organizations will continue to thrive.??

Theater that brings in high quality performances can really revitalize. The Hanover Theatre and Conservatory for the Performing Arts is an anchor of Worcester, Mass., showing that culture is so important to communities.



View of the marble stairs leading up to the mezzanine.
(© Dan Dionne)

What is unique or compelling that would bring someone into The Hanover Theatre for a show???

There's a personal touch here.? Whether they're the actors or the musicians, or the audience, we really try to make them feel welcome, because we're glad they're here.

We have a 300-person volunteer core. When the theatre launched in 2008, there was such an overflowing amount of support from the community. Everyone wanted to do something. They wanted to chip in because there's such pride about Worcester.?There is a level of dedication here that I've not seen before, and I think that people just love it.?It's like if you walk into certain retail stores and there's just a certain vibe, you can tell people are happy to be there. Our volunteers, our staff, are really happy to be here.??

You've only been in this role for a few months. How's it going and what are you focused on???

It's going well. At this point in the life of The Hanover Theater, we need to open the aperture of what's on stage and open the aperture in terms of the audiences that we are delivering to and for.? We just announced that we now have more options beyond our Broadway series. For the first time, our organization is offering a dance series. In this part of New England, you have Boston Ballet, a world-class company. You don't see a lot of professional dance in the rest of the state, until you hit Jacob's Pillow in the Berkshires, which is, again, world-class. My feeling was that there's a real opportunity here. We're bringing in companies such as Parsons Dance out of New York. We're bringing in Dance Theater of Harlem. The reaction has been just phenomenal.??

I'm also trying to build more awareness about our repertory company, because their work is being rehearsed, created, and performed right in our city. We're doing some great work there. And then lastly, we're offering films. I think people have been incredibly receptive.??

Our programming philosophy is slightly different than others. Some performing arts centers say, you must love this because this is great art. It's art, it's important. We're trying not to do that. We're trying to read the community, get their input, and then create a lineup of incredible shows inspired by those recommendations. That's really what we see as our function: to deliver great content for and about the community.?



Michael Underhill and Meri Stypinski in the THT Rep production of *Much Ado About Nothing* earlier this year
(© Unity Mike Photography)