

LOCAL

Newsmakers Pamela Mason Wagner and Thomas Wagner of The Arcadia Project



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Staunton News Leader

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2024 NEWSMAKERS

STAUNTON — Seven tons of moldy theater seats came out of the once abandoned Dixie Theatre on the corner of Beverley and Market streets in Staunton. A once-dark marquee facing main street had bits of missing glass bulbs that "looked like broken teeth."

First the theater was set up as a nonprofit and renamed The Arcadia Project, headed by Pamela Mason Wagner and Thomas Wagner. Then the empty building next door, its original name, the Arcadia, was sold to Miller & Associates and renovated into an apartment building.

Breathing life into an historic treasure and bringing the theater into the 21st century is due not only to the Wagners' steadfast commitment and perseverance but by making the enormous undertaking part of the community from its inception.

Staunton police dispatcher Jena Wolfe: Newsmaker 2024

Each year our newsroom profiles people who are part of a key pool of citizens moving forward the projects and topics our area cares about. Pamela and Thomas Wagner are two of our key 2024 News Leader Newsmakers.

It takes a Staunton village

"The marquee was in really sad shape," said Pamela.

"It looked like broken teeth," described Thomas.

They reached out to the sign company who installed the original marquee back in 1936, but the cost to repair it would have been close to \$200K.

Fire breaks out in Staunton on Christmas Eve

"We were like, OK, that's just never going to happen," said Pamela.

So Thomas went to the Staunton Makerspace during a Tuesday night brainstorming session and after he presented the challenge, somebody raised their hand to offer a solution.

"Ben Sharp, and he said, 'I think I can fix the marquee, and I can make it LED and energy efficient and make it good for the 21st century.'"

Sharp presented a plan to remake the marquee at a small fraction of what it was going to cost, and over the years, he accomplished that.

"He used the basic structure that was still there," said Thomas. "He had to repair some of the infrastructure. He did a wonderful job, and it's been lighting up for the last six or seven months."

This community-minded participation where individuals with different skill sets were able to play a role in renovating the theater, along with volunteers willing to do the heavy lifting whether that be helping to empty out the theater or coming to paint, has been integral to its successful revitalization.

Staunton man given four-year prison term for violent attack on inmate at jail

The Arcadia Project aims to enhance Staunton's cultural scene by creating a multipurpose space for performances, education, and community engagement. The goal is to open the theater in 2026, focusing on accessibility and outreach, with a goal to support local businesses and tourism.

'Towns that consider the arts are towns that will flourish and thrive'

Thomas Wagner had the connection to Staunton that eventually brought the couple to the area. In 1978, he came to Staunton to take part in a theater residency, living with Fletcher and Margaret Collins, founders of Oak Grove Theater. A music composer and arranger, Thomas worked on writing a play with Paul Hildebrand, founder of ShenanArts and its artistic director for over 20 years.

"I got to look at Staunton for that period of time in the summer of 1978 and it just struck me as a very wonderful place," said Thomas. "And Fletcher Collins had said something. A bit of a

mentor, also, he believed that towns that consider the arts are towns that will flourish and thrive, and towns that don't will not do so well. And that philosophy stayed with me, and I'm a believer in it. And Staunton was a good example of that, because even though Fletcher has been gone for 20 some years, this town was a town that considered the arts.”

The Wagners were living in New York City, both having extensive careers working on films and documentaries, including the Emmy-award winning PBS American Masters documentary, "Lucille Ball, Finding Lucy," — Pamela as its director and Thomas its writer — when Thomas began to think of pulling back on his work.

“I took Pam down here for a little vacation, and she loved it,” he said. “And we had looked at other places and this kind of checked all our boxes.”

The two came to Staunton in 2016 and bought the first house they saw, but it was when Pamela was on an historic architectural tour of downtown led by Marney Gibbs that Pamela would discover the abandoned theater.

“She asked us what we thought should happen in that space. And we were like, 'Well, why don't we ask the community what should happen?' And that's how this survey began, and slowly, we got invited to board meetings, and at a certain point, they asked us to take the project over.”

The Wagners put together a survey in an effort to research cultural gaps in Staunton. They wanted to build on the culture already in town and not duplicate what was already there.

“What we learned was people were interested in film, food, technology and music, both education and entertainment,” said Pamela. “And so that survey has really driven all the planning, the business planning, the architectural planning, the space planning of how to use that building, and that became the basis for our industrial revitalization grant application, which we then were awarded to 1.5 million last summer.”

Pamela saw the opportunity to get that grant, said Thomas, and she decided she needed to put all her energy into it.

“She basically retired from the documentary making business, and coincidentally, I went back to work,” said Thomas. “I came here and kind of retired from the film business, and I wasn't very happy in my retirement.”

Staying creative and sharing this with the community

Thomas had thought he would be doing more music so when approached by a Yi-Ping Chen, a local musician, to help her start the organization Caravanseraï Music, he decided to join. The nonprofit's name, according to the website means: "Along ancient travel routes, travelers would gather in the courtyard of an inn to share stories and music. This courtyard was called a caravanseraï."

"We put a board together and worked with her for a number of years," said Thomas. When Chen left to take a job as a professor at a university in Missouri, they continued to work to keep her vision alive.

"What we do is fill a niche," said Thomas. "We kind of connect popular forms with classical forms. So as an example, I did an arrangement, a Baroque arrangement of Paul McCartney's 'Blackbird.' So it takes this contemporary song, but does it in a kind of a modern Baroque."

"I'm just going to interject," said Pamela. "The mission really is to bring classical music to people who think they don't like classical music and make it more accessible."

"And that's been very good for me personally, because it got me back to performing," said Thomas. "It got me back to writing. So that's been very rewarding work for me and I plan to continue doing it. It's a wonderful group."

"We believe that music brings compassion and empathy to people's lives, and that's a big part of what we're doing," said Thomas. "As Arcadia wants to bring to underserved communities, we're also involved in that. So instead of doing a big concert this fall, we're doing outreach. We're going to churches, to the library. We played two concerts yesterday at retirement homes."

What The Arcadia Project will be for the Staunton community

Arcadia's mission is to build community through culture and creativity, but it's also to share the creative process with the community, said Pamela.

Despite COVID-19 setbacks, The Arcadia Project continued their work, including a series called "Music at the Movies."

"We partnered with the Visulite," said Pamela. "We did 12 of them. And we invited musicians to come in, select a movie about music that had influenced them in their lives, play a short

set, show the movie, and then talk about why they picked that film afterwards. It was a really fun series, and we wanted to give the community a taste of the kind of programming that we can do once we're open.”

Half of the building will remain a movie theater, the other half will become a multipurpose event space for music, dance, meetings, and conferences.

“We're ignoring the balcony, but we are building a second floor behind the proscenium for two classrooms,” said Pamela. “So the educational space will be on the second floor in the rear, and then downstairs on the first floor will be a green room, dressing rooms, catering, kitchen, makeup stations and a handicap accessible restroom. One of the exciting things that happened this year was when we got an additional \$100,000 from the state industrial revitalization fund that will support putting in a wheelchair lift to that second floor education space.”

“Our mission is to build community through culture and creativity, but it's also to share the creative process with the community,” said Pamela.

While the movies won't be first-run films, the Wagners plan to create film festivals that invite the community to participate.

“It could be a maker,” said Pamela. “It could be somebody talking about the themes in the film. If it's a documentary about farming, it could be a farmer making a presentation so that we're trying to have a live component to any of our film programming to create an add on, as it were, something extra that you can't get at the mall movie theater.

“And then in the flat floor space our emphasis is on intimacy and up close and personal, and trying to find groups who will perform and then do talk backs and also do outreach into the schools.”

Mentoring young artists in the community

Pamela has also remained creative since retiring from filmmaking by mentoring young artists as part of an internship program at Mary Baldwin and as a capstone project advisor to students at the Shenandoah Valley Governor's School.

“That's been a really enriching thing,” said Pamela. “I think when we moved here, it was time to give back to the community. We felt like this third chapter in our lives was the time we wanted to give back.”

Growing up in Southern California, Pamela's father saved an historic building when she was a child. It had been the town's local library and the city was going to turn it into a drug rehab center which didn't feel appropriate for that building, she said, so her dad turned it into a museum.

"Maybe I saw that as an example growing up that when you get to a certain point, it's time to really give back to your community. So that may be some kind of subconscious motivation to get involved with a crazy big project like this."

The Arcadia Project is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit community cultural center on 125 E. Beverley St. in historic downtown Staunton, Virginia, that looks to connect people through culture and creativity. Connect via email at info@thearcadiaproject.org or by phone (540) 885-3211. Learn more at thearcadiaproject.org.

(This article has been updated to add new information.)