

MAKING SPACES FOR ART

CAROUSEL PLAYERS

Turning Lemons into Lemonade

When we think of theatres, we don't necessarily think of them as being portable. But when Carousel Players was faced with leaving behind their much-loved Sullivan Mahoney Courthouse Theatre, they turned lemons into lemonade and brought the theatre with them. By leveraging their assets, focusing on community partnerships and thinking outside the box, Carousel Players was able to create a new theatre space within their community and continue providing space for groups in need.

Based in St. Catharines, Carousel Players is a theatre for young audience company that creates plays that tour to schools and other venues across the region and province. Established in 1972 by Brock University professor of Drama Desmond Davis, Carousel Players has performed to over 2.8 million children and their families. The company has travelled across Ontario, presenting in theatres including The Grand Theatre in London and the National Arts Centre, across Canada and overseas to England and Japan. Travelling with sets and costumes in a van and performing primarily in other venues, Carousel Players found themselves without consistent need for a theatre to call home. Instead, they occupied and ran their creative programming out of a number of non-traditional venues, including schools like the Edith Cavell School in St. Catharines. For years, this system worked well.

FINDING THE COURTHOUSE

Eventually, policies within the school boards changed and the ability to rehearse out of schools was limited. These changes led Carousel Players to start the search for a dedicated space to create theatre, expand outreach programs and perform shows with public audiences. In 2000, the solution came in the form of the old Lincoln County Courthouse. Dating back to 1848, the City-owned facility had recently been vacated and was the perfect place for Carousel



[The Lincoln County Courthouse](#)

Players to call home. From 2000 to 2004, Carousel Players underwent a \$230,000 renovation project to construct what they called the Sullivan Mahoney Courthouse Theatre – a black box theatre of 120-seats. Intimate and affordable, the space became an essential performing arts hub for a large number of performing arts companies in the community. Meanwhile, Carousel Players took over the second floor to create a shared creation and administrative space. For the next 16 years, the courthouse evolved into a bustling arts hub, occupied by local arts and music organizations.

THE SEARCH STARTS AGAIN

At the same time, the community of St. Catharines was in the process of developing a new performing arts centre in Downtown St. Catharines. The four-theatre FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre opened in 2015, providing a fantastic, state-of-the-art facility for the community and the greater Niagara region. However, as these things go, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The opening of the new facility, in combination with the serious accessibility challenges facing the Courthouse led the city to end Carousel Players' lease of the building. Once again facing a need for new space, this time Carousel also had to consider the space at the Courthouse – what were they going to do with this beautiful 120-seat theatre? They were reluctant to sell the equipment: the renovation had been primarily funded through community support and Carousel wanted to continue to serve the community by providing performance space.



Building the Robby

An opportunity came up to collaborate with the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre. This two-fold organization is both a settlement agency for newcomers and refugees and an annual multicultural festival that celebrates the many multicultural groups within Niagara region. They operate within the former Robertson School Historic Building, owned by the

City of St. Catharines and actively used by the local arts and culture community. Carousel Players and the Niagara Folk Arts Centre developed a partnership which saw Carousel Players use the second floor of the facility as a creation and storage space. In exchange, they agreed to take the equipment from the Sullivan-

Mahoney Courthouse Theatre to create a 50-seat black box theatre within the facility. There was a void in the community for an affordable, intimate performance space for local groups. Knowing the smallest venue at the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre was 120 seats, Carousel Players strategically decided to create a space that could accommodate 40-50. Carousel Players' General Manager Jane Gardner calls it a "stepping stone" space for local organizations needing an affordable space to produce their work. This partnership is a win-win: Carousel Players found a way to re-imagine the equipment from the Courthouse and secure space for themselves and other groups in the community.

BUILDING THE ROBBY

Carousel Players set about deconstructing the Sullivan-Mahoney space. With incoming General Manager Kate Leathers at the helm of the project, the first step was to go through all of their assets with a fine-tooth comb. Carousel Players identified exactly what they could take with them and what was surplus, and gave it back to the community in the simplest way: a yard sale. Other items were sold or given away until Carousel was left with only what they needed. A professional crew was brought in to deconstruct the space. In a forward-thinking turn (knowing they were occupying a leased space) the theatre had been designed to come apart, so almost every element was able to be moved. Carousel Players fundraised around \$20,000 needed for the project – primary costs were labour in the removal, transfer, and set up of the equipment between the two facilities.

As the Robby came together as a performance and rehearsal space, Carousel Players still had need for space for their administrative operations. They soon found space within local Silver Spire United Church. The congregation had recently focused on a strategic plan that would create and engage more arts activity within their space – so a space-sharing partnership with Carousel Players was a perfect fit. Silver Spire is the headquarters for Carousel Player's administrative operations – and the cost-effective space allows Carousel Players to provide meeting and workshop space for themselves and other community organizations. A model for best practices, the partnership goes beyond space-sharing. Carousel Players supports Silver Spire by actively advising on health & safety policies and practices, and launching arts community potlucks in their space. Meanwhile, Silver Spire was largely supportive of a recent Carousel Players production that generated some controversy: they provided space for public focus groups and helped them navigate feedback from the community.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

With two of three boxes ticked (performance space and administrative space), Carousel Players still needed space for their creative programming and outreach. While the Robby was great for productions and rehearsals, there were many groups using the Niagara Folk Arts Centre and the theatre couldn't support all of Carousel's programs. Likewise, Silver Spire had a number of regular ongoing activities and they found booking space consistently was a challenge as the venue was heavily used. Carousel Players had a long-standing relationship with Brock University, particularly the Drama Department and the Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts. They knew the Production Manager at the University was looking for chairs - they did not have enough portable seating to support other uses of their spaces. With over 100 chairs left over from the Courthouse Theatre, Carousel Players approached the University with an interesting proposition and offered the chairs in exchange for three years of workshop space for their programs. Carousel Players leveraged their assets and successfully secured their third and final space.

HOME SWEET HOME(S)



Carousel Players Artistic Director Jessica Carmichael and Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre Executive Director Jeff Burch outside the Robby

Carousel Players' adventures in finding space can provide many lessons for arts organizations and venues. For other organizations who might be looking for space or partnerships, Carousel strategically looked for partner organizations who shared common values: the importance of the arts and supporting the arts community. "We didn't just go looking for a landlord," says Kate, "we went looking for partners [...] for people we could move forward together with." They acknowledge that working out of three spaces is

a challenge – and for anyone in a similar situation, Jane stresses the importance of detailed scheduling and paying attention to the logistics to contribute to a success story.

Jane acknowledges Carousel's experience managing the Courthouse contributed to their success in managing the transition – they had a sense of what their future would be. "The crux a lot of arts

organizations have is balancing how much money to put into space vs. operations,” says Jane, “will this space always be the core of your operations?” Carousel found the Courthouse was eating much of their capital in repairs and renovations, and as much as they loved their space, they wanted to direct funds toward their creative work. Their new partnerships allow them to save on space, focus on creative endeavors and continue providing a venue for the community.

“The arts community [in St. Catharines] is growing,” says Kate, “and on the performing arts side that really started with the Courthouse. There was a great deal of sadness at it closing, because that’s where many of our groups got their start and grew their audiences.” She continues, “Many of these groups have grown to a point where they are performing at the FirstOntario Centre – but now there is a new crop coming up and they need a small space to grow themselves in too. That was a big commitment for us: we didn’t want to get rid of the theatre altogether. It was important we keep that creative resource available without it being such a huge part of what Carousel does day-to-day.”

In terms of what’s next, Carousel Players’ strategic plan for the next three years includes formalizing an agreement with the Niagara Folk Arts Centre for a long-term plan. The two organizations are currently working together to lobby for improved parking for the facility and the many groups using the space. Having recently opened the Robby, Carousel Players is focusing on getting comfortable with their new relationships with their hosts and continuing to support the creative community of St. Catharines. For now, it’s time to enjoy some delicious lemonade with their new partners.

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