

# The jewel of Elmira, Clemens Center celebrates its 40th season

If there can be one lesson learned from the longevity of the Clemens Center in downtown Elmira — now in the middle of its 40th season — it's this: Never underestimate the will of a community to come together and do something good.

Since 1925, the theater has survived the decline of the vaudeville circuit, the transition from silent films to “talkies,” and extensive damage after floods swept through the city in 1946 and 1972. Several major remodels over the past nine decades have at various points chopped the building down and added on to it, repainted and restored its interior, and even changed where audiences enter and exit.

With every step along the way, support from local leaders, businesses, foundations and the general public not only has kept the theater from the wrecking ball — a fate that too many former movie houses have faced — but helped it to thrive.

The nonprofit Clemens Center today is Chemung County's arts and entertainment hub, with 80,000 people attending performances annually, and folks behind the scenes take that responsibility seriously.

“Our mission is to provide quality entertainment and education in the arts for people of all ages,” said Karen Cromer, the center's executive director since 2015. “So whether you're a little tyke coming to see education matinees or a young adult seeing a Broadway performance for the first time or a senior enjoying the orchestra, we've got something for everybody.”

## The past

When Keeney's Theater opened on Dec. 21, 1925, local news coverage described the 2,600-seat venue as “the largest and most magnificent theater between New York City and Buffalo” and “a vision of gold and old rose, mural paintings and old ivory.”

The \$500,000 project (equal to nearly \$7 million in 2018 dollars) was built under the auspices of the Southern Tier Theater Corp., which issued stock to fund construction. Frank A. Keeney, described in the Star-Gazette as “a theatrical magnate and financier [and] a director of the Motion Picture Association of America,” leased the theater for 21 years and promised “the exclusive first-run Paramount program and the best of the independent output of moving pictures.”

In an era before films had sound, the Keeney's Marr & Colton theater organ served as a big draw for audiences, supplying not just the music but also some of the audio “special effects” as the action unfolded onscreen. Vaudeville acts touring through the region also stopped there with a variety of comedy, music and dance.

Like many old movie houses, the focus changed once films came with their own soundtracks. After Chemung River flooding damaged the building in 1946, it was remodeled with a CinemaScope screen and new seats, and it reopened as the Elmira Theater in 1952. Most of the opulent touches had been removed, such as the theater boxes, and nearly everything was repainted white so it wouldn't distract from the films.

When Hurricane Agnes' torrential rains overflowed the Chemung again in 1972, city planners nearly ordered the theater to be demolished in favor of a new highway. A group of arts-minded citizens raised \$750,000 to save the facility and rename it for Elmira's favorite adopted son — Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, who spent summers in the region and is buried here.

These renovations accommodated what became the Clemens Center Parkway by losing the theater's second balcony, shrinking capacity by almost 600 seats, and it also upgraded the stage lighting and audio systems. Resident theater organist David Peckham oversaw the restoration of the Marr & Colton organ, which required a new console.

Jazz legend Ella Fitzgerald performed the first official Clemens Center concert in 1977, and hundreds of concerts, plays, musicals, dance performances, stand-up comedians and other acts have followed.

After early leadership from Arnold N. Breman and Robert A. Freedman, Tom Weidemann arrived in Elmira in 1983 to become the theater's third executive director, and he loved it so much that he stayed in the job for the next 32 years. When he started, he inherited a "nice, clean theater" with "a good set of dressing rooms" and a stage that was "not terrible" considering the wear and tear it had seen over the years.

"The community support was really strong, and there were community leaders on the board of trustees who were really dedicated to the community and to the theater," he said in an interview earlier this month. "They really made everything come together and work."

Weidemann's memories accumulated during three decades are too numerous to share here, but he particularly appreciated the Clemens Center's relationship with actor Hal Holbrook and his notable performances of "Mark Twain Tonight!" over the years.

Performers appreciated the welcome they received in Elmira, and part of that was about giving them the space they needed to prepare to entertain audiences — no matter how famous they were.

"We had a general rule that no one was to go backstage unless there was a particular reason," Weidemann said. "Neither I nor anyone else just went backstage to say hello unless we were invited backstage. The performers responded well to recognizing that we knew they had a tough job ahead of them and that we were there if they needed anything, but we weren't going to be hanging on and bothering them just before a performance."

As executive director, Weidemann oversaw several additions and renovations to the Clemens Center. In 1987, the 2,500-square-foot Mandeville Hall was added as a multi-use "black box" theater suitable for drama, recitals, community functions, lectures and seminars. Some may know

it best as the home of Elmira Little Theatre productions (including “The Prisoner of Second Avenue,” which opened this weekend).

In 1999, a \$7 million Phase I project added a new lobby, box office, patron amenities and landscaping, as well as new heating, electrical and air-conditioning systems. Then in 2007-08, a \$19 million Phase II project renovated the Powers Theater from top to bottom by expanding the stage, upgrading the seating and restoring the decor as closely as possible to how it looked in 1925. Backstage areas also were modernized with an eye to attracting the latest productions.

Binghamton-based [NAC Entertainment](#), which presents Broadway tours in cities around upstate New York and northern Pennsylvania, partnered with the Clemens Center in 2008.

“After the renovation and restoration, they had a commitment to increasing their programming and events there,” said [Albert Nocciolino](#), president and CEO of NAC. “Along the way, they saw they could use some support with the programming. Since we were in seven or eight other markets, it was a natural fit for us right down the road. We always felt they were a separate community, different from Binghamton, so it wasn’t a conflict and could help with booking for both markets and other markets upstate.”

Weidemann departed from the Clemens Center in 2015 at age 65. After such a massive capital campaign, he said, it’s traditional in theater administration to turn over the reins to new leadership. (He did not stay idle long, though — he now works as the executive director of the International Motor Racing Research Center in Watkins Glen.)

“After 32 years, I felt that the community, the organization and the board deserved an opportunity for a younger, fresher view on performances. The performers that I was familiar with and had gotten to know over the years, the audience for them was aging and dying out. There was a need for some fresh blood to look at some fresh programming opportunities — and Karen Cromer certainly brings that to the center.”

## **The present**

Before coming to Elmira in October 2015, Cromer worked her way up the ladder at Butler University’s Clowes Memorial Hall in Indianapolis, where she served as operations manager, then director of operations and interim executive director. She admits that the pace was “pretty intense” because the venue served as an academic one during the week and hosted performances on weekends.

Her connection with theater, though stretches back to childhood, when her aunt was a costumer and her uncle a dancer.

“I remember distinctly seeing ‘Hello, Dolly!’ — I was so little that they had to hold my seat down because I’d fold up like a toaster!” she said with a laugh. “My uncle was dancing in the show, and he got bumped in the rear end by a cart onstage and was pushed off. I laughed so loud! I remember enjoying the theater from a very young age.”

She attended Indiana University at Bloomington to study telecommunications (essentially advertising and broadcast writing) but got sucked into the world of show business when a volunteer role at a campus theater became a part-time job and then a full-time one.

Cromer said that the history of the Clemens Center — knowing that it had been saved more than once because of community support — was one of the factors in her decision to move east and accept the role of executive director. Since taking over the theater's \$2.4 million budget and its 16 other full- and part-time employees, she has sought to diversify programming and expand it to run year-round.

“It's thrilling to be the head of such a marvelous place,” she said. “We forget sometimes — we're so familiar with the building and the venue that we forget what a special, special place this is. Most areas don't have such a beautiful, well-maintained theater and such a great playing space for these national tours. We take for granted what we have.”

When taking a tour of the Clemens Center with Andy Parker, the theater's director of facilities, it's clear that he knows and takes pride in every part of the building, from the beautiful “Garden of Hesperides” mural just above the proscenium stage to the loading dock backstage that makes it easier to get sets and equipment from trucks to the stage.

His relationship with the venue stretches back to when he sang onstage with the Mark Twain Barbershop Chorus at age 13. Over the years, he has worked there as a stagehand, later as a shop steward and in his current role since September.

Managing a theater means maintaining a lot of moving parts — quite literally. Counterweights raise the 800-pound curtain, massive machines raise and lower the orchestra pit, and even the console for the theater organ can be plugged in at a few different spots onstage. Dozens of lights dot the makeup areas in the dressing rooms, not to mention the ones at the tip-top of the Powers Theater as part of the organ's nearly-restored echo chamber. (Those are now LED bulbs so that they need to be changed less often.)

Recent shows from the 40th anniversary season have included [Black Violin](#), [Mannheim Steamroller](#), [Parsons Dance](#), improv masters [Colin Mochrie and Brad Sherwood's "Scared Scriptless" tour](#), “A Christmas Story,” [“Stomp”](#) and [“Baskerville.”](#)

From an economic standpoint, the Clemens Center attracts locals to downtown, and maybe they also enjoy a dinner or drink at local eateries, said Kamala Keeley, the president and CEO of the Chemung County Chamber of Commerce.

“Having a regional performing arts center centrally located in Elmira that serves Elmira, Corning and the Watkins Glen area helps the quality of life for everybody who lives here. It makes it much more appealing when we're looking to recruit people when we tell people, ‘Come to the Southern Tier and Chemung County — we have these assets, one of which is the Clemens Center.’”

Thanks to a New York state theater tax credit, several productions have started their national tours in Elmira, most recently “A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder.”

“We have become very fortunately known as a great place to tech shows, and it has done wonders for our bottom line,” Parker said. “We really, really appreciate those shows. We have those shows that come together here for the very first time before they go out on the road, and it is exactly because we have spaces like this.

“The Powers Theater by itself is a really good-sized space — it’s not too big and it’s not too small. When they set it up here, that makes a very nice footprint so when they go on the road, they can be very comfortable that they can set it up in just about any location.”

Nocciolino, a veteran producer of Broadway shows and tours for more than 35 years, added: “They have the stage house and the size stage where you can come and put the show together. Part of the renovation provided for space that works.”

When cast and crew from a touring production come to Elmira for a week or more of rehearsals before hitting the road, the chamber of commerce likes to make them feel welcome by handing out “swag bags” with coupons to restaurants and information about where to find what they might need while they’re in the city.

Another key component of the Clemens Center’s programming is the Mary Tripp Marks School-Time Series, which offers educational and entertaining weekday matinees such as “Nugget and Fang” and “Freedom Riders” for students in the region.

“You would think that schools have cut field trips and won’t come out, but they do,” Cromer said. “We have about 17,000 schoolchildren who come through our doors, and that’s a big way to get kids interested in live theater.

“Studies have shown that kids who see live theater have a better understanding of emotion and better relationships with peers. They also have a better memory of the story than even watching a movie of the same. So getting them exposed to the arts early is very important, and also having as many events here as we can.”

## **The future**

Like any nonprofit arts organization, fundraising is a fundamental part to keeping the Clemens Center open. Cromer points out that ticket sales account for less than half of the theater’s income, with the rest raised through community and family foundations, individual memberships (which have perks like ticket insurance in case you can’t make a show), corporate sponsorships and the New York State Council on the Arts.

“People think because you present Broadway [tours], you must be raking in big bucks,” she said. “That couldn’t be further from the truth. We maintain a budget and we have a partner that helps us to present Broadway, or we wouldn’t be able to afford it. Those casts and crew cost a lot of money, and the money to market them is significant. We split the risk and reward with NAC Entertainment.”

And just like being a homeowner, repairs and upgrades are an ongoing concern, even with the significant work done over the past 30 years. Parker jokes that instead of a “honey-do” list, he has a long “Andy-do” list to keep the theater in perfect working order.

“It’s a big challenge to keep up with every little thing that can go on here,” Cromer said. “Ten years in, we’re running up against the lifecycle of some of the systems and some of the equipment pieces. Then we’ll have to look at a capital campaign to chase down the dollars to fix and repair. We’re looking at all of those things constantly.”

Expanding what the Clemens Center presents — which means the theater is risking its own money against what they hope will bring in audiences — is a tricky balance, but Cromer’s philosophy is “very conservative” and built on experience. She looks to people in the community as well as longtime staffers like Associate Executive Director Julie A. Kriston (who started at the theater a few months before Weidemann) to get a better sense of what will work and what won’t.

“I’m out in the lobby for almost all of the shows that we present, just to talk to them and get their feedback,” Cromer said. “I like to listen to what they say as they go out the door. Usually they’re leaving here on a big high. That’s a good night at the theater.”

Weidemann still attends shows at the Clemens Center, but admitted that he tries to get upstairs to his seat without stealing attention from the theater’s current staff: “It needs to be focused on the people who are making it happen today, not the people who made it happen years ago.”

As a patron, though, “I am thrilled with the variety of programming that Karen has brought to the theater. It’s gutsy and she’s taken some risks, and she’s put together an incredible lineup.”

With the fate of First Arena in limbo, the Clemens Center remains the one place where audiences can go for entertainment in Elmira. It’s no wonder that Keeley calls the venue “the core of the downtown revitalization initiative.”

“We’re happy to see the enhanced programming that Karen has brought to the center under her leadership,” she said. “Now they’re doing programming year-round, which is tremendous. That arts enrichment in the community adds to the quality of life for everyone here to enjoy.”

For her part, Cromer is laying down plans to continue the Clemens Center’s remarkable story into the future.

“We’re looking forward to the next 40 years,” she said. “It’s been a great run, and there’s a lot more opportunity for us to engage the community, to get them interested, and to inspire the next generation of artists or creative people backstage.”

*Chris Kocher – Elmira Star Gazette  
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