

WE SIT
TOGETHER
IN THE DARK
TO KNOW
HOW TO LOVE
EACH OTHER
IN THE LIGHT.

STAGES



Photos by Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

Intermission

By Wei-Huan Chen STAFF WRITER

Up-and-coming Stages theater company hits pause in pandemic but is faring better than most



For Stages, 2020 was supposed to be a year of growth and renewal.

The professional theater company – formerly known as Stages Repertory Theatre – had essentially just opened its new \$35 million building, the Gordy, when the pandemic hit.

“It’s hard to imagine having this thing for so long, then it evaporates. And there’s no forward motion, and no chance for us to gather again,” says Kenn McLaughlin, artistic director of Stages.

Stages continues on G17

“It’s a playground, but we don’t get to play on it,” Stages artistic director Kenn McLaughlin says of the company’s new Gordy building.

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“Our donors were able to come through in a huge way ... (but) this is not a rosy picture.”

Kenn McLaughlin, artistic director



Karen Warren / Staff photographer

Back in January, Tyler Hecht, on the ladder, rehearsed with Kiaya Scott for “The Fantasticks.” Then the pandemic struck, and Stages’ performances were canceled.

STAGES

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Stages had been growing steadily as a theater company over the years, with the rare local theater-company budget and staff that was increasing year over year. The company challenged the notion that Houston, whose theater scene is mostly known for the Alley Theatre, was a one-theater city.

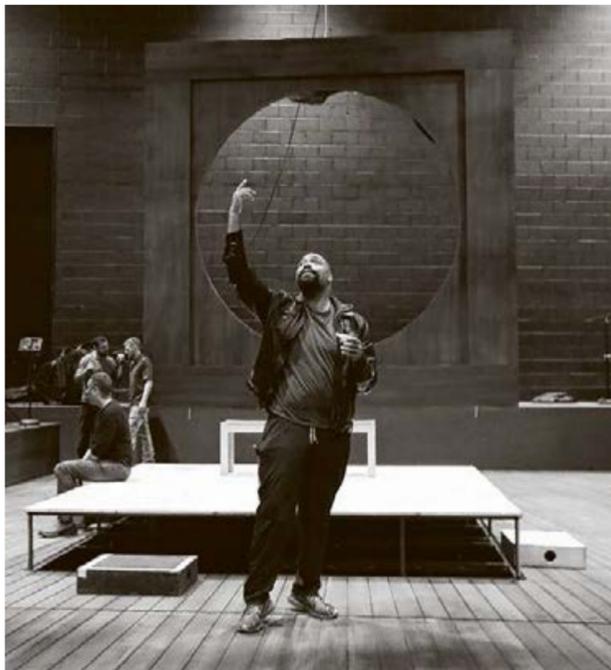
The Gordy, as well as the fundraising campaigns that supported it, symbolized the potential emergence of Houston’s first true medium-sized theater company. But what happened to that narrative when all theaters in America were forced to shut down?

“We’ve had to become good at change, at improvisation,” McLaughlin says.

Like nearly all other theater companies in the country, shows were canceled. Rehearsals for Zoom-presented shows took place on the conferencing platform, as well as meetings. But Stages, unlike larger, downtown-based companies such as the Houston Ballet, the Alley Theatre, the Houston Grand Opera and the Houston Symphony, was able to avoid financial disaster.

“We ended the year in the black,” says McLaughlin, referring to the company’s stable finances for the end of fiscal 2020. “We didn’t lose a penny.”

That meant Stages has so far avoided laying off any of its 41 full-time-equivalent employees. McLaughlin says Stages avoid-



Karen Warren / Staff photographer

Actor LaBraska Washington rehearsed for “The Fantasticks” on the Sterling Stage at the Gordy, the new home for Stages.

ed losses for several reasons. There was the timing – the company was lucky enough to hold its annual fundraising gala before COVID-19 hit, as well as announce and begin selling season tickets for its 2020-21 season. And there was support from Stages’ donor base.

“Our donors were able to come through in a huge way,” he said. “I do think it all flows out of how people were feeling about Stages and us being crystal clear about what we wanted

as an organization. In June, we had a surge in fundraising. We did have support, and we continue to have support.”

No ‘mountain of cash’

But the pandemic remains a nerve-racking time for the company, which was supposed to be months-deep into programming for its three-theater venue.

“This is not a rosy picture. We’re not sitting on a mountain of cash,” he said. “We’ve been able to manage because we’re a

small organization that was riding an enormous wave.”

Anyone who has worked in a collapsing industry can relate to an environment of drastically shrinking revenues. Larger organizations, get hit hardest and fastest while leaner operations are seen as the “lucky ones” – yet lucky is only a relative term.

No organization in the country is prepared for a sudden vanishing of revenue, with no promise of a return to normalcy soon. McLaughlin hopes for a potential reopening in October. Meanwhile, the company is producing online versions of its current programming. Stages is currently staging an online version of “Pieces of the Moon,” a play about the American cultural moment in 1969, focusing on the Apollo II moon landing and the Black arts movement.

McLaughlin says this is the second time he’s seen the theater world ravaged by a disease.

“To me, I live this as my second plague. I came out in 1979. I grew up through AIDS. People I dated died,” he said. “I went through a plague, as part of a population that was completely ignored. But I found myself through it. The greatest part of my identity came from the power to fight that evil.”

Out of the AIDS crisis, McLaughlin said, two formative and seminal works of American theater arose. The first was Larry Kramer’s “The Normal Heart,” and the second is Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America.”

“Those pieces of art became blocks you could stand on when

the rest of the world seemed insane or crumbling,” he said.

Diversity still a priority

One key conversation happening right now is over equity and diversity in the theater world. McLaughlin said he, like many other artistic directors in the country, is paying attention to the waves being made by the “We See You White American Theater” movement. The movement is a petition and joint statement by some of the country’s most influential theater-makers of color demanding systematic change in American theater.

“I think it’s the most exciting manifesto I’ve seen in my life. It’s the most exciting herald of change for the world I’ve seen,” he said. “It’s aspirational and angry. It’s got power and heart and passion, and it’s reaching for a better world.”

McLaughlin said he’s interested in rethinking how seasons are programmed at Stages, and said the 2020-21 season, which was chosen by him and 11 staff members, is a start.

McLaughlin doesn’t have answers to being a theater-maker during the pandemic. But he says that, during this shutdown, the American regional theater is being given a chance to re-evaluate just what American theater is and wants to be.

“My lived experience is that adversity does define our character,” he said. “We have to keep fighting our way through it.”

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Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

Stages is supposed to be months-deep into programming at its three-theater venue.



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Stages’ Kenn McLaughlin says “Honky Tonk Laundry” never had an opening night.