

# STAGING CLEVELAND

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STORIES FROM THE FIELD

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Good to Have a Theater  
in the Neighborhood

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# Good to Have a Theater in the Neighborhood

## **ANCHOR**

Theaters make great neighbors, especially in commercial districts where you want anchor attractions to draw visitors into restaurants, coffee shops, bars and retail establishments before and after their shows. Cleveland Heights boasts three major theater venues that provide well-attended destinations in the Cedar-Lee and Coventry neighborhoods.

A landmark resident of Coventry for more than four decades, Dobama Theatre now serves that anchor tenant role on Lee Road, since relocating there in 2009. Each year, according to Nathan Motta, the theater draws approximately 20,000 attendees for the mainstage plays. Motta, who serves as Dobama's fifth artistic director since Donald Bianchi and others founded it in 1959, adds that they count several thousand more attendees each season for other programs, such as the Dobama Emerging Actors Program (DEAP), the Marilyn Bianchi Kids Playwriting Festival – the oldest children's playwriting festival in the US – and Playwrights Gym readings and performances.

Additionally, there are a number of programs produced by community organizations who rent the theater, such as the Haiku Death Match sponsored by Heights Arts to celebrate National Poetry Month in April, and programs put on by the Cleveland Heights–University Heights Public Library, which houses the theater.

"All of those events bring people to the neighborhood to patronize restaurants, bars and shops up and down the street," Motta says. He adds their full-time staff of three may be small, but they hire a long list of contractors (ie, actors, stage managers, designers, stagehands, house managers, bar managers, etc.) each year. He estimates that number ranges up to 35 or 40 for each play.

"That changeover happens with every show," Motta explains. "So that's more people being employed in Cleveland Heights who get coffee or go to dinner before rehearsals and so forth."

According to a study by the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, for each job created in a theater company, an additional 1.27 jobs were added to the local economy.

## **STRATEGIC ALLY**

Moreover, Dobama has a number of in-kind advertising and marketing partnerships with Cedar-Lee District stakeholders to whom they provide tickets to plays. One mutually beneficial relationship emerged last year in the form of their own vintner. Before she opened the Cleveland Urban Winery on Lee in July 2016, owner Destiny Burns contacted Motta and managing director Julie Friedman to inquire about a partnership. "My vision was to donate to nonprofits in the community and to support the arts to integrate my business more fully into the fabric of the community," Burns says.

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She donates all of the wine Dobama needs, including her Cedar-Lee Chardonnay and C-Town Cabernet Sauvignon, which stocks the theater's new bar while exposing her brand to all of the theater's patrons. Dobama also held its 2017-18 Season Announcement event at Cleveland Urban Winery.

"Our partnership is developing nicely," adds Burns, who also lives in the neighborhood. "It's great for both of us and for the community."

As Artistic Director of Ensemble Theatre, Celeste Cosentino maintains similar close relationships with storeowners on Coventry Road. Her mother, Lucia, who founded the theater in 1979, had advertisers from both Lee Road and Coventry, when Ensemble was located in the Civic Theater on Mayfield Road just east of Lee. After a transition period when the theater was temporarily housed in the Cleveland Play House, it moved to its current location in 2011 after the former Coventry School closed.

"Coventry School was empty, so it was just money down the tubes for the city," Cosentino observes. "Then we became the anchor tenant, and now there are nine nonprofit groups in the building. So it's better for the community, because those people are paying taxes, and the building is being reused."

She estimates the theater currently draws roughly 7,000 people each season for both plays and outside programming, such as free new play readings and workshops. In the summer when Ensemble is dark, Cleveland Shakespeare uses the theater space for auditions and rehearsals, so that there is a year-round presence in that space.

She recently joined the Coventry Village Special Improvement District group, and she continues to foster long-term relationships with stakeholders. She is finalizing plans for a special discount for Ensemble patrons who would receive a 20% discount if they went to Bodega Restaurant and Lounge across the street. Recently, Ensemble and Coventry mainstay Mac's Backs bookstore partnered to sell copies of *Walden* during the theater's production of *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* by Robert Edwin Lee and Jerome Lawrence.

"We provide the book and discounted them heavily so it would be a fund-raiser for Ensemble, when they sold them during the play," says Suzanne DeGaetano, co-owner of Mac's. "I'd like to do more of that, because with any play, there are many literary connections, not just the script."

## **FORUM**

In choosing plays for Ensemble's seasons, Cosentino consciously selects shows that reflect current social issues. She then includes audience talkbacks focused on those issues. "My mission is to create a platform to have discussions about life, to talk about the human condition," she says. "That's why I create a theme for each season, so we can talk about how those specific topics affect our local community."

She also has a larger goal of transforming the still partially vacant building into a performing arts center. She shares this with several of the tenants, such as Shannon Morris, executive director of Artful, and Amy Rosenbluth, co-founder and executive director of Lake Erie Ink. Cosentino and Morris, who opened in March 2017, are planning to open an art gallery in a large, shared space in the middle of the building,

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so that visitors can view and possibly purchase art, say during intermission of a play, as well as hold public events in that space.

“As a group, we want to create a space that everyone can enjoy,” Cosentino says. “We want to give people a lot of different reasons to come into the building and offer a networking opportunity for our community.”

## **COMMUNITY HUB**

Of course, every summer Cleveland Heights residents and theatergoers from other cities and states flock to Cain Park, the city’s outdoor theater complex in the park that opened in 1934. Cain Park offers a variety of plays, concerts, events for children, workshops and the popular annual Arts Festival to delight and entertain the community. Unlike the other two theaters, Cain Park is not a nonprofit, but is owned and operated by the city of Cleveland Heights.

“We get a lot of community support because of that, as well as funding and mass marketing support to reach everyone in Cleveland Heights,” says Joanna May Hunkins, who’s in her first year as Artistic Director, but she’s attended, studied and worked as an actor and director at Cain Park since she was a child.

Cain Park has numerous long-term advertising and marketing relationships with restaurants, bars and store owners, but, Hunkins says, they prefer their partners to provide community engagement, as well. Heights Arts on Lee Road, for example, participates in and does special programs for the Arts Festival every year.

Hunkins’ goal as artistic director is to continue making productions as Cleveland Heights-specific as possible. Two years ago, the production of *Godspell* that she directed had the main character, Jesus Christ, wearing a Colony Bar t-shirt at one point. This summer’s production of *The Music Man* will feature the Contemporary Youth Orchestra, a Cleveland Heights-based organization, along with a cast of about 50, including many residents of the city.

Although Cain Park has endured some financial and budgetary challenges during the past decade, Hunkins feels optimistic about future growth opportunities. “Within the last couple of years, we’ve gained a new City Manager and Head of Parks & Recreation,” she says. “I’m already seeing the beginning of long-term planning for how we can get the community more involved using Cain Park as a springboard.”