

The West Jordan Performing Arts, now known as the Sugar Factory Playhouse, celebrates its 25th Anniversary in July 2020

One of the original members of the theater, Petronella (Pat) Oliver, remembers some challenges over the years. In the beginning, with the support of West Jordan City administration and only a handful of volunteers, Oliver said they thought they could do “Annie Get Your Gun!” but they did not know how costly royalties were. So, they asked their friend Ruth Hale for permission to perform one of the old musicals she had written. Hale agreed to allow them to produce her show “Dude Ranch” for a \$25 royalty fee.

"We performed ‘Dude Ranch’ four nights in the park pavilion,” Oliver said. “We sold out every night, and we were on our way."

Initially, the theater group rehearsed in the attic of West Jordan City Hall and then performed outside in the West Jordan City Park. The stage was built in a covered picnic pavilion with bleachers from the baseball fields brought over for the audience. There were no dressing rooms, according to longtime volunteer Shaina Burgoyne.

"I'm sure a few soccer parents were surprised and confused as we did quick costume changes between sheets hung from trees," she said. "No one had only one job, as the actors also took part in stage construction, costuming, marketing and even security." Sometimes members of the theater had to camp out on the stage overnight to monitor valuable sound and lighting equipment.

"It seemed every year there was at least one rainstorm that threatened to cancel everything, but despite a muddy backstage area or thunder accompanying the musical score, the show always went on," Burgoyne said.

West Jordan theater has always been about family and community.

"My family first got involved during its third year when we performed in ‘Oklahoma!’ and it's been a part of us ever since,” Burgoyne said. “As a teenager, the summer musical each year was a wonderful way to connect more with my family, make new friends and be a part of the community, not to mention those summer backstage romances."

In 2002, the group changed its name to the West Jordan Theater Arts Board and was allowed to use an old Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints meetinghouse where the current fire station now stands. Oliver was asked to direct “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever” that winter.

"What a joy it was to take the written page and bring it to life,” Oliver said. “We had a great cast and filled every seat every night." But city leaders had other plans for that property, so they were soon performing in the park again.

Two years later, in 2004, the theater group was given access to a portion of the old West Jordan Sugar Factory building that was a former shop, a boxing workout room and a truck storage garage.

"When we started rehearsing for 'Footloose,' we literally rehearsed around a street sweeper vehicle parked in the middle of where the stage and front seats were to be when we performed," Burgoyne said. The building was soon refurbished into a black box theater and given a fresh paint job by a group of volunteers led by Dave and Sandy Newton. The company was dubbed the Sugar Factory Playhouse.

The organization thought it had finally found a permanent home, but city leaders deemed the building unsafe, so the Sugar Factory Playhouse group was homeless again. In March 2010, three days before the scheduled opening of "See How They Run," the organization was notified that the show couldn't be held in the Sugar Factory. They moved the show to the Midvale Performing Arts Center and opened on time. The 40-foot set had been dismantled, modified and rebuilt on a 25-foot stage in two days. Volunteers from all over the valley and other community theaters helped. The generosity of Midvale City officials and the Midvale Arts Council also made it possible.

However, the Sugar Factory Playhouse was once again without a permanent home. In the years since the sugar factory closed, the group found temporary performance space in West Jordan High School, Copper Hills High School, West Jordan City Hall, Viridian Events Center, West Jordan Rodeo Arena, Pioneer Hall and the Midvale Performing Arts Center.

In 2015, the group was permitted to use the old West Jordan library for limited storage, rehearsals and small performances until city officials could build a new, dedicated arts facility. Once again, the community gave their time and effort to convert the old library into a makeshift theater. Simultaneously, the group was rehearsing for "The 39 Steps" as well as building the stage and set.

However, shortly after "The 39 Steps" closed, the group was informed that the building did not meet fire code requirements for the number of people that would occupy the building during performances. Once again, the theater group was without a permanent home.

"Although West Jordan Theater Arts has been transient for most of its existence, we remain committed to providing excellent theater performances for the community from whatever venue we can requisition," Burgoyne said. "The history of West Jordan Theater Arts is far more than a story of trying to find somewhere to perform. It is the story of thousands of individuals sacrificing for the arts in their community regardless of setbacks and difficulties. We are extremely grateful for the many, many residents of West Jordan and its surrounding communities for the time and love that they continue to give us."

In January 2019, Sugar Factory Playhouse, along with other arts and performing groups, moved out from under the umbrella of West Jordan City into a nonprofit corporation, Cultural Arts Society of West Jordan.

West Jordan City Council and administration have been working for the past few years on helping create a permanent home for the arts organizations within the city. No date has yet been set for the construction to begin on the West Jordan Performing Arts Center.

With the current coronavirus situation, 2020 has presented a new set of challenges. Sugar Factory Playhouse had to postpone its spring and summer shows for a later date. Visit the website www.sugarfactoryplayhouse.com for future updates.

A contest to celebrate the Sugar Factory's 25th Anniversary will be held on the group's page www.facebook.com/SugarFactoryPlayhouse. Entrants will need to follow the Facebook page.

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<https://www.valleyjournals.com/2020/07/13/321096/west-jordan-celebrates-25th-anniversary-of-the-sugar-factory-playhouse>