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PALACE INTRIGUE

Greensburg theater looks
to diversify programming

COVER STORY

By Samuel Long
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The interior speaks to its name — French Renaissance architecture, two-story murals on both sides of the stage, red velvet seats, beckoning corridors that lurk around every corner.

The Palace Theatre has been a Greensburg community staple for almost a century. Now, it's set for some changes.

Under new Westmoreland Cultural Trust CEO Benjamin Luczak, the organization has adopted a strategic plan to “engage, empower and serve the community through consequential programming, arts education and cultural experiences for all.”

Diverse programming

Right now, the Palace hosts tribute bands like Floyd Nation and Experience Hendrix, holiday shows, theater, comedy and such family programming as Sesame Street Live! and Rhythm of the Dance.

“People want to see that,” Luczak said of the programming. “They want to see something that they know that makes them feel good as opposed to something more avant-garde, where they don't know if they're going to like it or not.”

The Palace Theatre sold more than 90,000 tickets in 2024, almost 15,000 more than its attendance in 2023, which totaled just over 75,500. Luczak said it's a result of a post-pandemic resurgence in “getting out” to public venues. From a financial standpoint, the Westmoreland Cultural Trust is also growing, having made \$8.4 million in 2024 revenue, according to Luczak, compared to \$6.3 million in revenue for 2023.

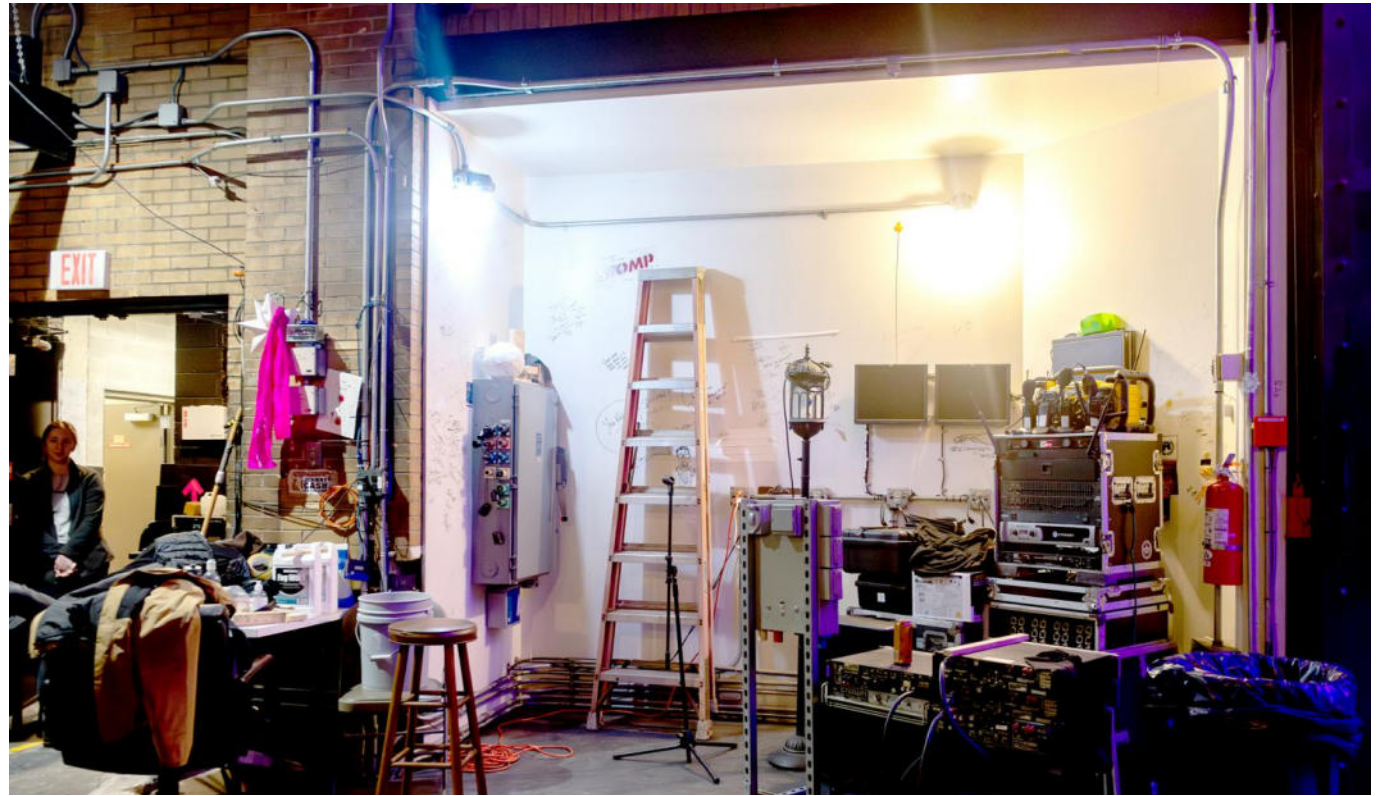
Part of Luczak's vision includes expanding The Palace Theatre's programming to historically underserved populations and “developing new audiences for Westmoreland Cultural Trust events.”

Right now, Luczak said the Palace Theatre's programming largely caters to “old white people” with its tribute bands and comedy.

“We know our demographic, Westmoreland County, is predominately white, predominately older,” Luczak said. “It's projected to have a decrease in population over the next 10 to 15 years of up to 10% and our job as a cultural institution is to get young people in there with diverse voices to be able to make up for when those people leave us.”

He also said he wants to develop new audiences for the trust by bringing in jazz bands, theater performances, dance companies and even circus acts.

Luczak wants The Palace to start hosting more big-name, original artists, too. He said American television host and comedian Jay Leno's performance at the venue in 2024 was a “headliner” — something that was “wonderful to have.”



Samuel Long/Post-Gazette photos

The backstage of The Palace Theatre, which houses equipment, desks and even the theater's ghostlight.

THE PALACE THEATRE HAS A PLAN TO EXPAND AUDIENCES, PROGRAMMING



The heating, ventilation and air conditioning room of The Palace Theatre.

Keeping it functional

Part of the Palace's strategic plan includes renovating the rest of the 100-year-old building's infrastructure to be on par with industry standards.

The theater originally opened in September 1926 as the Manos Theatre, a vaudeville and silent movie venue. It kept the name until 1977, when it was sold to Carl V. Marinelli and his business partner Adelaide DeVitto and renamed. DeVitto eventually sold her interest in the theater back to Marinelli.

The Westmoreland Cultural Trust, known then as the Greensburg Garden and Civic Center Inc., acquired The Palace in 1990 after Marinelli passed away. The nonprofit has used over \$18 million in the building's renovations since 1990. Most recently, the trust has paid to level out the basement, upgrade the HVAC system, restore the original ticket booth and get a new projector. Most of this money came from the trust's reserves and general operating budget, Luczak said.

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PALACE, FROM WE-8

The trust is largely funded by organizations renting The Palace to hold their own performances, Luczak said. It also receives income from 32 total tenants in their four buildings, three of which the nonprofit owns outright and one that it manages. That includes eight tenants who live right above The Palace in individual apartments. All of their rents are subsidized, in accordance with the theater's mission.

And while all of the funding has helped the trust make strides with renovations, Luczak said there is still an estimated \$5 million to \$7 million worth of work that needs to be done. This includes upgrading the theater's audio and lighting system, upgrading the fire alarm system and waterproofing the basement.

Currently, the Westmoreland Cultural Trust is engaging in a "fundraising audit," which will determine if more finances, aside from what the organization usually generates, are required to complete these renovations. While there is no timeline for this work, Luczak said the trust wants to get "as much of it done as possible" before the theater turns 100 in September 2026.

"That being said, that's not on a strict timeline," he explained. "For instance, we want to replace the orchestra seats and redo the concrete floors and get carpeting in there. That would have us shut down the theater for a couple weeks, so we have to plan ahead."

Moving forward

Previously, the venue has hosted the likes of The Beach Boys, The B-52's, Dave Mason, Gordon Lightfoot and Joe Satriani.

Though the Westmoreland Cultural Trust hasn't scheduled any programming they find "diverse," the goal is included in the first 12 to 18 months of its new strategic plan. Luczak said he and William Elder, the theater's programming and production director hired in December, attended the Association of Performing Arts Professionals in New York City to scout new talent in January.

Vice chairman for the board of directors of the Westmoreland Cultural Trust Kevin Jansma, who headed the search committee that hired Luczak, said the pace of growth at the organization since its hired a new CEO has been welcomed. He said Luczak has played a large role in renovating the building, diversifying the programming and creating the strategic plan.

"You've got a beautiful 100-year-old structure in downtown Greensburg that is, in my view, one of the hearts of the city," Jansma said. "And I think what Ben is leading is a great project with the support of the board to just freshen up and put The Palace where it should be to celebrate its 100-year anniversary."

The community

High numbers for The Palace mean more business for surrounding restaurants.

Christopher Batton, the 55-year-old who owns the nearby Greensburg Distilling Company, said depending on the type of



Samuel Long/Post-Gazette photos
CEO Benjamin Luczak, right, and programming director William Elder stand in the basement of The Palace Theatre in Greensburg.



CEO Benjamin Luczak, center, programming director William Elder, left, and marketing director Daniel Stainer stand in front of the stage of The Palace Theater.

band playing at the venue, his distillery experiences an increase up to 50% in customers for that night.

"Time and type of event is certainly a factor," Batton said. "If it's more of a rock band with a younger up to middle-aged crowd, then we might see more of a crowd that's coming in for cocktails and a bite to eat before the show. If it's an older crowd, we may see little or no business in that respect."

Taylor Kalasky, 28, and a previous owner for six years of the recently closed Yumzio Bistro, said her restaurant regularly received catering orders from bands and crews that

performed at The Palace. Because the Bistro was an all-vegan menu, Kalasky was often called upon to fill meals for performers with dietary restrictions.

"I really saw more of the behind-the-scenes crew more so, sometimes the main headliners — their assistants — would come out and get them their meals or their food and the things they liked," Kalasky said. "But a lot of the time for comedians and different things, they would come by and they'd be very humble about it. So I wouldn't know until they were pretty much walking out the door. But it was very interesting."

Though Kalasky and Batton had separate experiences, they both said The Palace is a "huge draw" with its different events, including free ones such as the 12-week Rhythms of Summer concert series or the Greensburg Music Fest. Batton said he launched the Greensburg Distillery Company brand at the February 2024 Party at The Palace fundraiser and sponsor appreciation event.

Batton, who has resided in Greensburg for eight years, said he'd like to see more national and diverse acts at the venue.

"It seems like things have shifted more towards national tribute bands rather than the original artists," he explained. "I'm not sure what that is directly related to, but I think that the national shows, the original artists would probably bring even more people into town."

During the next few years, Jansma said he expects The Palace and the Westmoreland Cultural Trust to grow as the "spectrum" of shows by the organization widens. That means the arts may touch a larger number of Western Pennsylvania audiences than it previously could.

And residents, including Batton, believe that the venue is a "vital" part of Greensburg.

"Live entertainment is irrevocable," Elder said. "The experience of live entertainment is on a knife's edge any moment. This is happening right now — it's live. That is irreplaceable."