

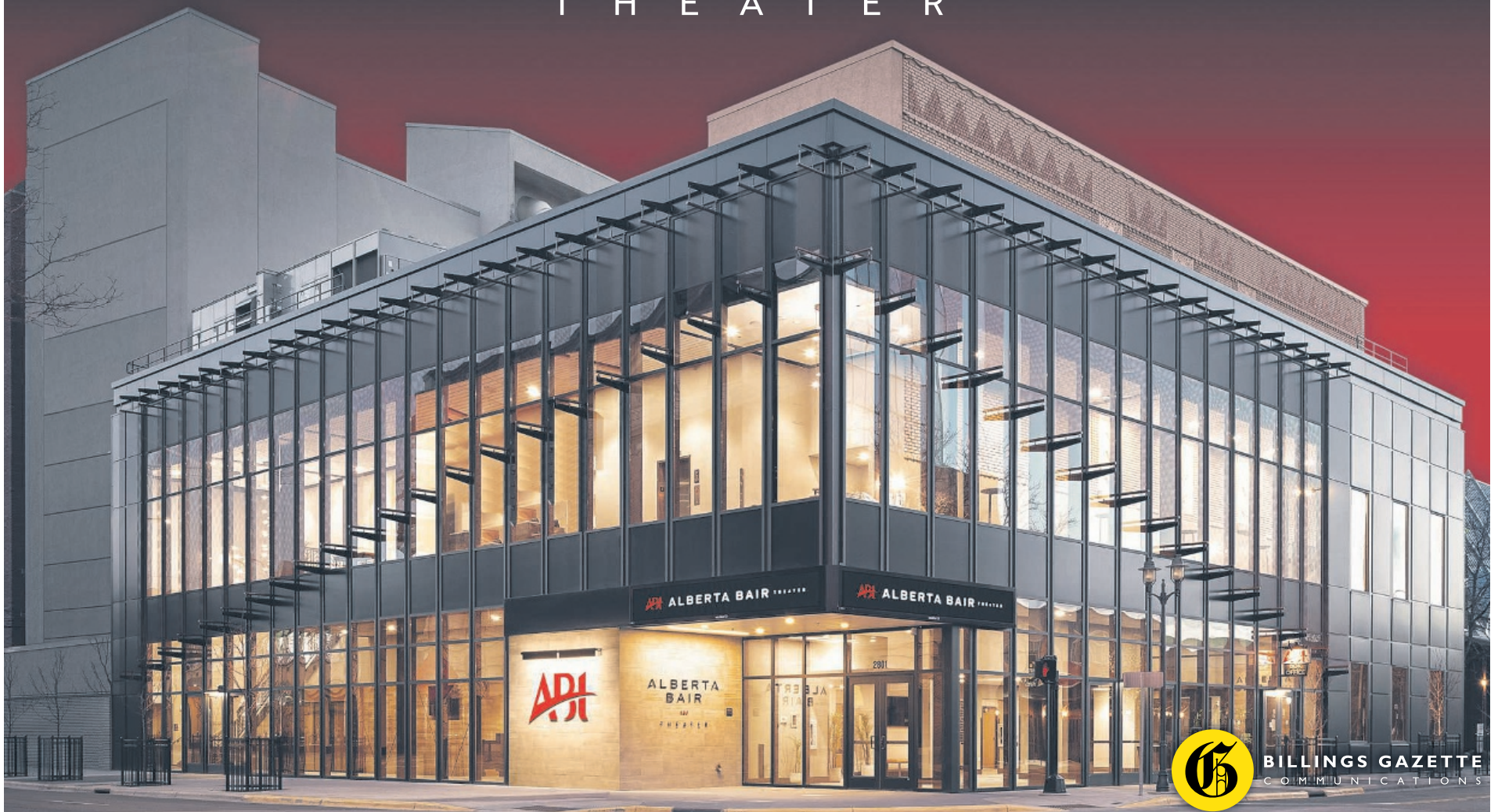
IT'S SHOWTIME!



ALBERTA
BAIR



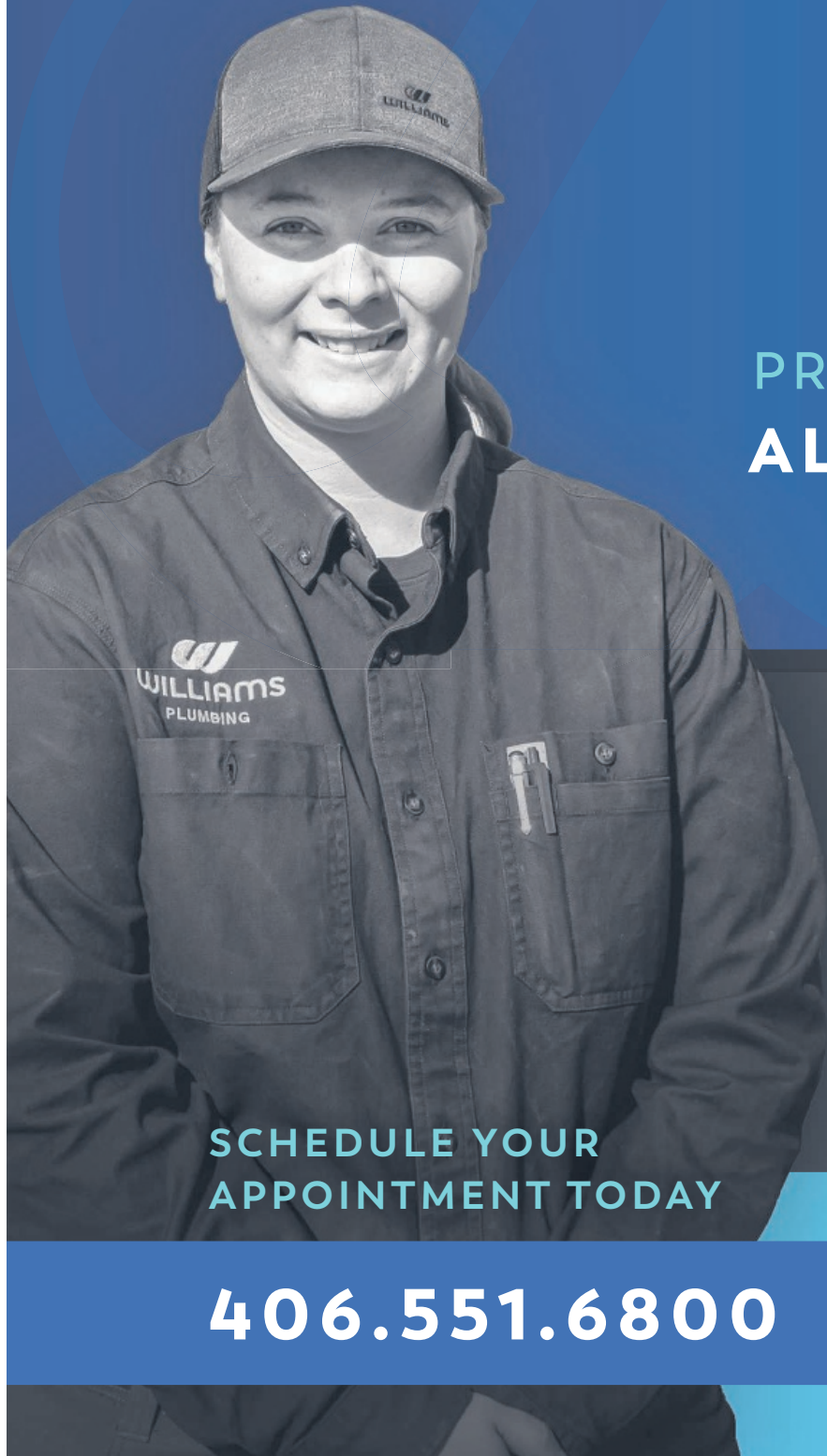
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Showtime at the Crown Jewel on Broadway

We are thrilled to soon welcome you to the expanded and beautifully renovated Alberta Bair Theater and the exciting "inaugural" 2021-2022 season! On behalf of the ABT board, professional staff, and volunteers, thank you for your support of this transformative renovation project resulting in a memorable, visually stunning, much-improved overall theatrical experience. We are justly excited to once again offer our patrons an outstanding variety of live performances ranging from Broadway shows and symphonic ensembles to local thespian performances and life-changing cultural experiences.

What a tremendously exciting time for the ABT to reopen after closing physically in May 2019 for a 16-month, \$13.6 million renovation that left no aspect of the historic venue untouched. This much-anticipated grand reopening was sadly delayed an additional 12 months due to COVID-19 community protocols. Thankfully, this beautiful venue can now safely reopen for the enjoyment of all. In addition to a dramatic new glass, metal, and scrim exterior, the theater renovation includes an expanded building footprint and lobby, an elevator and ADA access, new electrical, lighting, sound, and HVAC systems, new seats, enhanced restrooms



and concessions, a new symphony sound shell, a grand staircase, and innumerable behind-the-scenes technology and performer amenities. This project has transformed the historic Alberta Bair Theater into a modern performing arts center befitting of Ms. Bair's legacy, the ABT's mission, and your

heightened expectations.

The vision and generosity of our donors and especially this community must be acknowledged and honored. Financial support in increments ranging from one dollar up to \$3.5 million dollars was received from individuals, corporations, trusts, foundations, and city government. Incredibly, over 95% of the funds raised came from donors within the state of Montana! Truly, thank you.

Serving on the ABT board since 2014, it has been an honor and privilege to lead the theater board, staff, and volunteers through the renovation and economic / COVID-19 challenges over the past 27 months. I am eager to witness the rebirth of this beloved theater as the cultural center of downtown Billings.

Enjoy the show!
Ron Yates, Jr., CPA
President, Alberta Bair Theater Board of Directors

Alberta Bair Theater Founding, Former and Current Board Members

The Alberta Bair Theater's mission is to bring the excitement of the performing arts to the Big Sky Country through quality programming, arts education, cultural diversity, community partnerships and exceptional customer service.

The success of any nonprofit organization is dependent on an engaged and active board of directors who have made a commitment to the mission. We want to recognize these generous community members who have guided us along the way. Thank you!

+ *Agnew, Hewes (1981-1998),
(2007-2013), (2018-current)
Arguelles, Martha (1998-2004)
+ Bair, Alberta (1981-1989)
(Deceased 1993)
Baldwin, LaRell (2015-2015)
Ballock, Steve (2015-2020)
Benoit, Kathleen (2011-2016)

Bergman, Catherine (2017-2019)
Blanco, David (1994-1999)
Buchanan, Gary (1990—1995)
Burgad, Gene (1996-1998)
(Deceased 2019)
Bergeson, Heather (2013-2018)

Please see **BOARD**, Page 4

It's been a joy and privilege to watch Alberta Bair Theater continue to make strong artistic impacts in our community over the past 35 years. Each season we re-affirm our mission of bringing the excitement of the performing arts to Big Sky country through quality programming, arts education, cultural diversity, community partnerships and exceptional customer service.

I first became involved with ABT as its founding education director. Through meeting with our area educators on a regular basis, I was able to help sow the seeds for the dynamic education outreach program that has flourished over the years. Art education and access to the arts need to be for everyone regardless of race, age, gender or economic situation.

From 2004 to 2010, I served on the board of directors and came to know many of our volunteer leaders in this



city who have a strong commitment to making the arts a fully integrated part of this vibrant community.

More recently, serving as the executive and development director through this historic \$13.6 million renovation I've had the honor to work with some of the most

generous businesses and individuals in our community, as well as experts in the performing arts arena.

Through these various roles I witnessed the generosity of our community and its commitment to a world class performing arts venue in the heart of downtown Billings. The Alberta Bair Theater, the Crown Jewel on Broadway, will continue to deliver on its mission for generations to come.

Many encores await!

Jan Dietrich,
Executive Editor

Congratulations Alberta Bair Theater



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Alberta Bair Theater Founding, Former and Current Board Members

Capsler, Erica (2005-2008)
Carpenter, Janet (2003-2006)
Castle, Julie (2009-2011)
Christiaens, Maria J. (2021-current)
Cladis, Nick (2006-2006)
Coffman, Vicki (1994-2000)
*Cole, Bill (2003-2011)
Cook, Chris (2011-2017)
Cook, Keith (2001-2004)
Cook, Paul (2013-2015)
*Cornett, Sherri (2002-2006)
Corning, Jennifer (2004-2010)
Corning, Steve (1990-1994)
Cuff, Harry (1997-2003) (Deceased 2016)
Davies, Bill (2018-current)
Desin, Cyndy (2012-2015)
Dietrich, Jan (2004-2010)
Dimich, Bill (1994-2000)
(Deceased 2021)
Dorr, Chris (2003-2011)
Doucette, Brittainy (2021-current)
Edwards, Hollis (2015-2018)
+ *Ennis, Carolyn (1981- 1996)
(Deceased 2017)
Fercho, Kira (2021-current)
Flick, Dennis (2000-2005)
+ *Foster, Stephen (1981- 2000)
(Deceased 2009)
Fox, Lynn (2007-2010)
*Gordon, Alice (2007-2015)
*Gottwals, Bill (2012-current)
Gray, Michael (2010-2013)
Guerttman, Dan (1999-2002)
Gulledge, Mike (2004-2006)
+ Hart, Ray (1981-1994)
*Havig, Ray (1996-2002)
Hills, Vi (2005-2008)
*Hingle, Charles (1996-2003)
*Hirsch, Wayne (2004-2011)
Hulteng, Allyn (2010-2016)
*Hylton, Robert (1989-1996)
Jacobsen, John (2003-2009)
*James, Doug (2009-2012)
Jenkins, Doug (2006-2009)
Jensen, Kirk (2017-2020)
Jensen, Shannon (2017-current)
Jockers, Lee (1990-1993)
Johnson, Chris (2010-2011)
*Johnson, Judy (1990-1995)
Kauffman, Leonard (1991-1997)
Kavlie, Kendall (2009-2014)
Langlas, David (1999-2005)
+ Long, Thelma (1981-1989)
(Deceased 2004)
*Lovely, Susan (1999-2005)
+ *Martin, Laurence (1981-current)

McCarthy, Vicki (1999-2004)
*McCracken, Tersh (1998-2004)
McDonald, Greg (2001-2007)
McNally, Mary (2000-2006)
Merrick, Kendall (2009-2012)
+ Miller, Ann (1985-1999)
Millikan, Tamra (2003-2006)
*Murphy, Allan T. (1999-2005)
*Murphy, Brooke (2013-current)
Nason, Shanna (2001-2007)
+ Norsworthy, Jase (1981-1990)
(Deceased 2020)
Orser, L. Eileen (1988-1994)
Parrish Takes the Gun, Christian
(2021-current)
Peet, Mary (1990-1995)
Peete, Duncan (2019-current)
Petersen, Roger (2000-2003)
Peterson, Arthur (1989-1994)
Pitman, Leslie (2007-2015)
Reiter, Sandra (1991-1997)
Rouane, Jeremiah (2018-current)
Royer, Laverne (2007-2013)
*Rupert, Keith (1995-2001)
+ Sample, Joseph (1981-1989)
Sanderson, Michael (2013-2019)
Scherer, Denise (2014-2017)
Schrotberger, Derwood (1981-1991)
+ *Scott, James (1981-1998)
+ Selover, George H. (1981-1989)
(Deceased 2020)
Skinner, Corby (2017-current)
Smith Karin (1997-2003)
*Spalding, Paige (2000-2008)
Spence Jr., Ralph (2005-2008)
Stevens, Mac (1993-1999)
Strausberg, Bill (1994-1995)
(Deceased 2007)
Swain, Jim (2011-2017)
*Thomas, Sidney (1990-1996)
Toner, Bill (2012-2018)
Tooley, Chuck (2007-2010)
Twito, Christine (1995-2001)
Underriner, Mary (1994-2000)
+ *Waller, Robert (1981- 2000)
(Deceased 2015)
Weatherwax-Ripley, Sharon (2006-2012)
*Whittenberg, Bruce (2001-2007)
Wilmouth, Liz (2011-2017)
+ Winegardner Jr, A.F. (1981-1989)
(Deceased 2013)
Yackley, Melissa (2020-current)
*Yates, Ron (2014-current)
Zawada, Jackie (2009-2012)

* Board Presidents
+ Founding Board Member

ABT volunteer has greeted patrons since 1987

By Kathleen Benoit-Whiteley

Most successful nonprofit organizations depend on volunteers, and the Alberta Bair Theater (ABT) is no exception. Between the theater's early beginnings in 1931 and today, thousands of volunteers have crossed the lobby's threshold to take tickets, sell concessions, usher patrons, check coats, offer hearing devices, give directions, and perform many more tasks the public never sees. ABT Executive Director Jan Dietrich said volunteers are the lifeblood of the theater.



Thomas

"Beyond making our patrons feel welcome, volunteers are vital to our bottom line in operating the theater. Before COVID halted our programming in March 2020, ABT volunteers had worked nearly 86,000 combined hours since 1987. The value of their time and dedication cannot be understated. We are grateful for each and every person who has chosen to volunteer at Alberta Bair Theater."

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women currently volunteer more than men. ABT volunteer Deanna Thomas is among those good souls and she is still going strong, greeting everyone who enters the theater with a warm smile and a kind word. For 34 years, Deanna has brought her own special magic to ABT.

It all started in 1987 when Deanna's interest was piqued by a newspaper article on the Alberta Bair Theater volunteers. "Working at the theater was right up my alley," she said. "It was a wonderful opportunity to meet people and use my people skills, so I signed up for an interview." Deanna was interviewed by two well-known Alberta Bair Theater employees, Box Office Manager Jane Schultz and former Program Director Corby Skinner.

Skinner was a longtime ABT employee and currently serves on the ABT board of directors.

While reminiscing about her early days with ABT, Deanna brought up the theater offices, then located in the Hart Albin Building. She remembered gathering there for morning training sessions and learning the ropes of theater etiquette and customer service. Deanna loved every aspect of volunteering for the theater, including the opportunity to watch world-class live theater. Of all the performances Deanna has seen over the years at ABT, she said The Ten Tenors was her absolute favorite, and Up With People was a close second. She added that one of the best things that ever

happened to her as a volunteer was having the privilege of knowing the theater's namesake, Alberta Bair. "She was such a fabulous person," Deanna said, "outgoing, full of life and love, and she always remembered my name."

Deanna's message to people thinking about joining the ABT Volunteer Corps is: "This is a great opportunity to experience wonderful performances and meet other volunteers and patrons who are just as excited to see you as you are to see them."

Deanna said that as long as her health allows and as long as she can drive, she will continue as an ABT volunteer. "The theater has enhanced my life so much, and I plan on sticking around for a while."

So, what are you waiting for? Consider joining the ABT Volunteer Corps. If You sign up, there is a good chance Deanna will remember your name.

For information, visit <https://www.albertabairtheater.org/about-abt/volunteer/> or contact: Front of the House Manager (406) 294-5220

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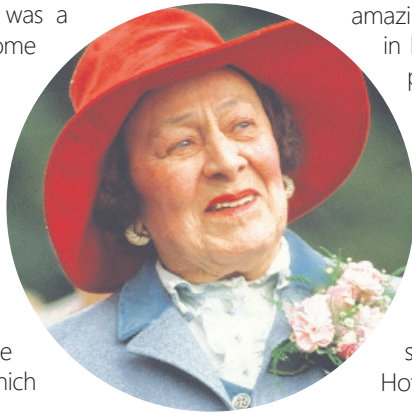
THE LONG ROAD HOME

By Corby Skinner

Many people may not know that the original Charles M. Bair family homestead was on the corner of Broadway and 3rd Avenue North, the same spot where the Fox Theater was built in 1931. This house is where Charles' daughter Alberta M. Bair was born. This unique circumstance, and some gentle prodding from Fox Committee members, prompted Alberta Bair to provide the lead gift for the project and in 1987 the renovated Fox Theatre was named in her honor. Alberta often joked that it cost her ten times as much to buy the place back than when she originally sold it.

Alberta was very pleased with the theater. She took great pride in sharing the story of her early homestead with visiting guest artists. The annual "gala" was a perfect opportunity for Alberta to welcome entertainers to town.

Six-time Grammy Award winner and three-time Academy Award winner Burt Bacharach is considered one of the most important composers of 20th-century popular music. Bacharach was selected to help open the theater in 1987, and Alberta was delighted to fetch him from the airport for the ride to town in a rented limousine. She'd usually tell the driver, "let's take the long road home," which

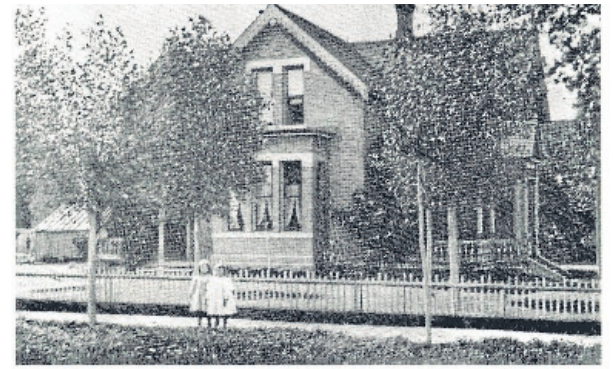


meant a trip along the Rims and down Zimmerman Trail back to downtown. "Gives us a little more time to chat," she'd say.

Bacharach's father Mark "Bert" Bacharach was a well-known syndicated newspaper columnist. Wounded in WWII, he was sent to recover in a hospital in London. Alberta and sister Marguerite were famous European travelers and happened to be in England at the time. She told Burt that she remembered stopping in to visit the soldiers and fondly remembered meeting his father. She told Burt she distinctly remembered his father saying that his son was kind of interested in music, particularly jazz, and he hoped that maybe someday he'd make something of himself.

That night on stage, Mr. Bacharach related this amazing story of synchronicity. With a tear in his eye he said he felt destiny must have played a part in his being on stage for the opening night at the Alberta Bair Theater. A flawless, heartfelt performance followed. He epitomized how a truly memorable concert is really an intimate conversation between the musician and the audience.

Several days later, I had lunch with Alberta at the Golden Belle, her favorite spot while staying "in town" at the Northern Hotel. I thanked her again for her generous



Alberta Bair and her sister, Marguerite, at the family home in downtown Billings, on the corner of Broadway and Third Avenue North, now the site of the new Alberta Bair Theater.

contributions to the cultural life in Billings, and I recalled the amazing story about Burt Bacharach's father. With a twinkle in her eye, she said, "you know Corby, most of it was true." Alberta never let details get in the way of a good story.

The story of the Charles M. Bair is Montana history. The story of Alberta Bair is Montana legacy. Alberta was a wise investor, a great storyteller and a visionary. The Charles M. Bair Family Trust was established to commemorate the legacy of one of Montana's most influential families. The Bair family's dedication to philanthropic work in Montana is carried on in accordance with the wishes of the last surviving member of the family, Alberta M. Bair, who died in May 1993. And so, her generosity continues.

Alberta, you took the long way home, and we humbly thank you for the wise decision.

Congratulations Alberta Bair Theater on your Grand Re-Opening!

PYRAMID

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MEMORIES OF “THE FOX”

By Christene Cosgriffe Meyers

On this grand night for singing, I salute the reopening of this hallowed space. For me and thousands of others, the Alberta Bair Theater will always be “The Fox.” For it was here as a wide-eyed youngster, I heard many of the great artists of the 20th Century.

In this 1931 building – and the slightly older Babcock — I developed my love of the performing arts. As a child, I was spellbound at cellist Gregor Piatagorsky, violinist Yasha Heifetz, singers Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson (who stayed in private homes because of their color). Community Concerts hosted a string of Metropolitan Opera stars, dancers, singers, jazz trumpeter Harry James — a veritable who’s who of the world’s top performers.

As an arts reviewer, I interviewed legions of performers in the basement green room: Virgil Fox, Robert Merrill, Alvin Ailey, Bella Lewitzky, Martha Graham, Arthur Fiedler, and many more.

I grew up with The Fox, so when I launched the campaign to save the building in 1976, I recruited many of my sources including Donna Forbes of Yellowstone Art Museum, Bob Cookingham of Parmly Billings Library, the Northern Hotel’s Con Carter, philanthropist and historian Senia Hart, vocal coach and Rocky Mountain College professor Elizabeth Rowan, rancher and realtor Earl Rosell, Western Heritage Center director Bob Archibald, banker Bob Waller, and the immensely talented director Skip Lundby, who was manager and artistic director of the Fox Committee for the Performing Arts during my 10-year tenure as president.

I’ve grown up with this theater, one of several dozen Fox Theatres built across the country at the end of the depression. So I was sentimental about saving the building from the wrecker’s ball. My artistic tastes were sharpened here and my Fox Committee shared my passion. Not a single person I approached declined to join; very quickly, initial opponents of the project were clamoring to join the board. How lovely that it had become a “fashionable” cause. The Fox Committee took over utilities at the building which Carisch Theaters was

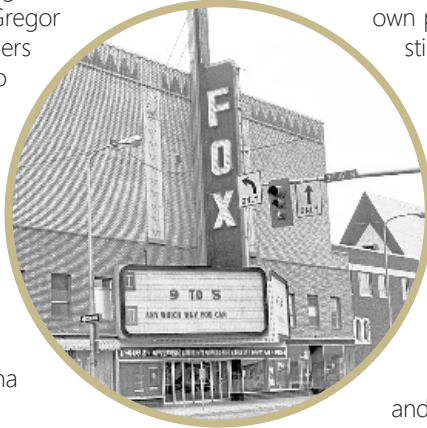
still running as a movie house. We were struggling to book a regular “imported arts” season, and did so, including Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo. Our first big locally produced show was in 1977, the charming “I Do! I Do!” for which I played pit piano, enticing my old friend and violin teacher Jim O’Brien, to conduct, and my late husband Bruce Meyers and Cathy Hansen as the leads.

Our wonderful orchestra included then Billings Symphony concertmaster Eloise Kirk on violin, and with our own private funds, Bruce and I offered a small stipend. I charmed the musicians and they loved the music and storyline. Once again, no one said no. We sold out a three-night run, followed by “Promises, Promises” and “The Fantasticks,” all featuring well known local actors and musicians, always including Bruce. I did conducting, musical arranging, piano, beating the drum at the Gazette’s Enjoy and on the editorial page to encourage support.

In 1979, I approached Hewes Agnew and Ray Hart to help with fundraising. Our now non-profit organization had an abundance of artistic acumen but needed business direction to raise the estimated \$5.6 million to renovate the building.

Hewes and Ray came aboard and formed what would become the Fox Corporation, later naming it after Alberta Bair. That same summer, Bruce and I took a second mortgage on our home (via banker friend Bob Waller at the then Midland Bank, before First Bank and then U.S. Bank). We needed \$25,000 to secure Dave Brubeck and The American Conservatory Theatre of San Francisco. It was a gamble, but Bob believed in our cause and on four very warm days that summer of 1979, we sold out three ACT performances and Brubeck’s packed one-night-only run.

The ACT won a Tony that fall for best regional theater and its director William Ball thanked Billings, Montana, and The Fox, for the warm hospitality. Brubeck was still in his prime and when I interviewed him during intermission in the seedy Fox dressing room I was wearing two hats: concert reviewer and president of Save the Fox. I asked him to put in a plug for the campaign and when he came back on stage, he gave a



rousing plea, “you must save this theater” which was greeted with thunderous applause, cheers, whistles. The next week Skip and I opened the mail to several thousand dollars in donations. (Badly needed because our AC went out during the plays and for two winters, we wore our coats to meet in the lobby because we could not afford the heat bill.)

Fox Theatre manager Skip Lundby was living on a shoestring inside the theater, a modern day phantom of the opera, warming hot dogs and TV dinners on the stage footlights and sleeping bundled up in the light booth, the warmest corner of the drafty old 1931 building.

I was one proud Cookie in 1987 at the gala opening and when Dana Gioia visited as head of the National Endowment for the Arts, our dear opera friend Doug Nagel and others joined him in honoring me. I treasure that evening.

On the building’s 90th birthday, celebrate this evening with me. Long live the arts. Long live the ABT. Long live “The Fox.”

“Save the Fox” committee members ponder turning an old vaudeville house into a performing arts center.



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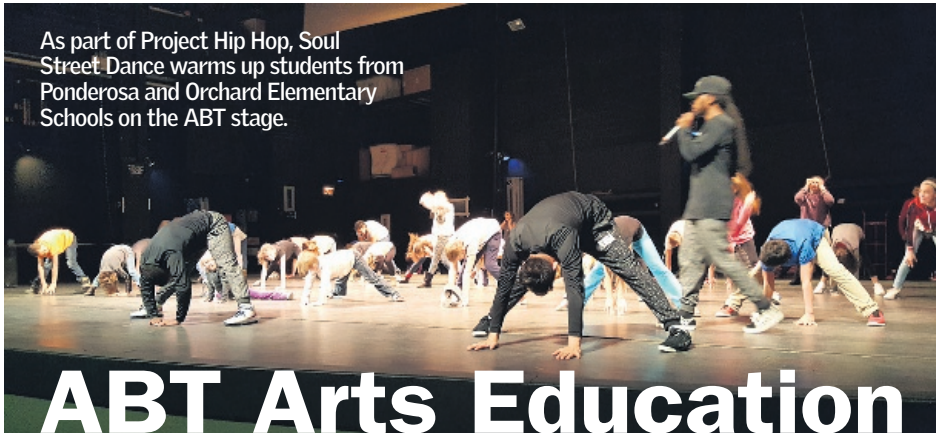
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As part of Project Hip Hop, Soul Street Dance warms up students from Ponderosa and Orchard Elementary Schools on the ABT stage.



ABT Arts Education is for Everyone!

The Alberta Bair Theater (ABT) is more than a beautifully renovated, fully equipped, state-of-the-arts venue. Along with being a place for entertainment, ABT is also a place to learn. Since 1991, thousands of students, grades K—12, have been introduced to live performing arts. Through the theater's education programs, most children in the area have had their first glimpse of the performing arts at the Alberta Bair Theater, and their reaction is

always amazing.

Imagine a group of rowdy junior high students getting their first taste of opera at an ABT student matinee featuring excerpts of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. During the overture, the teens heckled the performers, but at the conclusion of the matinee, they were humming refrains of the opera as they boarded their school bus.

Along with opera, ABT education coordinators and educators make it a

point to present a wide range of innovative programming and outreach, such as the Celtic ensemble, Caladh Nua, the Montana Repertory Theater production of *The Great Gatsby*, performances by contemporary dance ensembles, classical ballet and professional Hip Hop dancers. In addition, students have experienced the captivating approach to the spoken word by Mayhem Poets; and an introduction to paleontology through Livewire Theater's electroluminescent performance of *DinoLight*.

These past performances were accompanied by related public events such as discussions, lectures, workshops, masterclasses, and student matinees.

From the mouths of babes:

The Alberta Bair Theater's programs have an enormous impact on a child's education, but there is also a wonderful outcome for families.

For example, in 2017, ABT presented a student matinee performance by Black Violin, a Hip Hop duo who are classically trained string instrumentalists. The performance was so electrifying that the audience, comprised of students grades six-12, was on their feet the entire show. Many of them persuaded their parents to accompany them to the evening performance so they, too, could come into contact with an out-of-the-box-musical showstopper.

Throughout the years, student matinee experiences have been shared over the family dinner table—young people excited to tell their parents what they experienced at the Alberta Bair Theater. Learning never stops, and many of those young theatergoers become life-long learners, returning to ABT again and again to experience something new.



Scrap Arts Music from Canada performed at a school matinee and offered percussion workshops for students and teachers.

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The Emperor Has No Clothes

By Corby Skinner

The Broadway musical is among the most popular form of entertainment at the Alberta Bair Theater. They are usually big, splashy productions with a large cast, lavish scenery, gorgeous costumes, and often a small pit orchestra. Think of past shows, Chicago, 42nd Street, Evita, Cats, Show Boat, A Chorus Line.

Musicals are also difficult to book in the rural west. Appropriate venues are more than 500 miles apart which makes traveling to Billings an investment for both the company and the presenter. But the Broadway musical is here to stay, and following COVID 19 restrictions, more shows will be opening on Broadway in New York and more shows will be out on the road.

Major renovations at the Alberta Bair Theater cannot make traveling Broadway productions any easier to come by, but when the shows are booked, the new theater is prepared with state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems, new rigging to support large set and scenery, and a much larger loading door to get all the equipment onto

the stage. That has not always been the case.

Several years ago the theater was fortunate enough to book the touring production of Rogers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*. Known as a "three truck show" it was one of the largest productions to come to ABT. Unloading the trucks require a large workforce and are under strict labor regulations. If there are not enough workers, the trucks are not unloaded. And this was the case.

But the show must go on. Following the overture, the curtain opened on a large crowd celebrating "The Prince Is Giving a Ball." There were no backdrops, no scenery, and no festive costumes. The whole cast was prancing about in black leotards. I think many people in the audience assumed that maybe this was a modernist version of the classic story. So by the time Cinderella sang the lovely tune "In My Own Little World" the crowd was hooked. Interestingly, with a lack of costumes and sets the audience focused on the musicality, the voice, and the characters within the story. It puts a thought-provoking spin on the theme "Do I Love You Because You're Beautiful, or Are You Beautiful Because



Left:
Cats

Below:
A Chorus Line



I Love You?" Perhaps love is indeed blind.

This spring, ABT will present the Tony and Grammy Award-winning musical, *Beautiful*, based on the career of Carole King. It's an inspiring story of one woman's remarkable journey from teenage songwriter to Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Featuring over two dozen pop classics, including "You've Got a Friend," "One Fine Day," "Up on the Roof," and

"Natural Woman," this crowd-pleaser is filled with the song you remember. And, with the ABT's new stage and superior staff, we can safely assume that in this musical, all of the characters will be fully clad.

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Performing arts venue lives on in historic building after \$13.6M remodel

by Anna Paige

originally published December 13, 2020
in the Billings Gazette

There's a noticeable new glow along North Broadway, as a \$13.6 million renovation is finally complete at Alberta Bair Theater. The original building, a former Fox movie theater built during the Great Depression, is now encased in floor-to-ceiling glass walls jutting nearly 20 feet from the original brick exterior.

The project, which brought the 89-year-old building up to code and enlarged the theater, tackled everything from upgraded lighting and sound to new seats, expanded restrooms, additional concessions, a new box office entrance on North Broadway, and numerous enhancements to the facility to support modern touring performances.

The theater now awaits its formal debut, a fate tied closely to the pandemic.

"This has been a long-awaited opening," said Jan Dietrich, ABT executive director. "To not be able to do it after everyone has worked so hard and stuck in there ... We are dying to open."

Though the keys were officially handed over to ABT staff on Dec. 1 as construction crews exited the building, the theater will remain closed indefinitely.

"We weren't certain we would get here," said ABT Board President Ron Yates. "The mood today is euphoric with a bit of sadness, simply because we are not able to open."

The theater's reopening is dependent on restrictions due to COVID-19, as well as the touring schedule of the world's entertainers. Most acts booked for the ABT's 2020-21 season were postponed, and the hope is to resume performances by fall 2021.

"We have lots of fixed costs," said Yates, estimating the overhead just to open the doors exceeds \$10,000, making it unreasonable to host even small gatherings — currently restricted to 25 people in Yellowstone County.

"We find ourselves in a situation where it's less expensive for us to stay closed than it would be to open," Yates said. "It's a real dilemma."

'A history of compromise'

This isn't the theater's first go-round with troubled times. Designed in the 1920s by Robert C. Reamer and finished in 1931, the



theater is the last of the Fox Corporation's vaudeville and motion picture houses. By the time the theater in downtown Billings was completed, the country was well into the Great Depression and became the last of its kind to open.

Reamer, an architect who also designed the Old Faithful Inn at Yellowstone National Park and worked on the Roosevelt Arch, had his hand in several other theaters in the 1920s in Washington, each with the splurge and grandeur many theaters and movie houses of the early 20th century were embodying.

Though some cuts were made to the Fox's flashy opulence in Billings, the theater displayed a grand vibe, heavily influenced by the art deco movement. Throughout, accents of green, rose, and gold mingled among marble surfaces warmed by plush red and blue carpeting and thousands of glimmering lights. Hand-painted wall motifs of hunters armed with arrows pursuing gazelles were accented by silver clouds adorning the ceilings. Elegant chandeliers illuminated the nearly 1,400-seat auditorium, and outside, the flashy marquee beckoned people from the street.

On opening night, Nov. 17, 1931, the town celebrated with a parade and street dance on North Broadway. Inside, "False Rooms," "Fisherman's Paradise," and "Merely Mary Ann" played on the screen.

The Fox became a hub for new movie releases while also hosting touring acts, ballet, and live music performances. The theater courted performers including actor Boris Karloff (who portrayed Frankenstein's monster) and opera and contralto singer

Marian Anderson in the 1930s, soprano Gladys Swarthout and cellist Gregor Piatigorsky in the 1940s, and other top names of the time including Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Charles, George Winston, and Judy Collins. Ballet troupes from L.A. to Chicago to Belgium took the stage, as well as local arts organizations like the Billings Symphony.

Though the Fox continued to be a venue for global arts and a place for many community plays and performances, the years wore heavy on the theater and it fell into decay. The grandeur of going to the movies dwindled in the 1950s and '60s as drive-ins became popular, followed by the black-box multiplexes in more populated suburban areas and retail malls. The neighboring Babcock Theatre, opened in the early 1900s as an opera house and later converted to a movie theater, was also showing films until it went out of business in 1981, and though it was eventually reopened it struggled to compete, closing again in the 1990s.

In 1978, Carisch Theaters purchased the Fox Theater with the intent to reboot it for movies, which spurred arts supporters to launch a "Save the Fox" campaign to purchase and renovate the building.

"The place was really a mess," said Hewes Agnew, a founding board member of the Alberta Bair Theater. "It smelled and it was just run down, and it sat atop an underground river. It was just wet, with water running down the steps. It was unbelievable."

Agnew, who was active in the initial renovations of the 1980s, said the theater has a history of compromise. "A decision was made early on not to recreate the original

theater," Agnew recalled, in part because it was going to add a hefty price tag to the already desperately needed improvements. It was decided by the committee that restoring the theater to its original state "was not important," Agnew said. "We were going to make it a performing arts center."

Saving the theater

Downtown Billings in the 1980s was pretty rough. The community was struggling from bottoming out oil prices. Rail travel was declining, and the last passenger train had departed the Depot in 1979, leaving the area vacant and deteriorating. Revitalization along Montana Avenue was still years away.

"The town was in terrible shape," said Agnew, a heart surgeon who joined up with the Save the Fox committee, formed in 1978 to raise funds for the revitalization of the theater.

Yet, there was good reason to believe Billings was ready to support such an ambitious project. In 1971, the original Parnly Billings Library along Montana Avenue was saved from demolition to become the Western Heritage Center, and in the mid-'80s the Billings Preservation Society acquired the Moss family mansion and set about restoring the home, built in 1903.

Ann Miller, one of the founding board members for the Alberta Bair Theater, described the drive to "Save the Fox" as a remarkable collaborative effort.

"Business was in an economic down cycle. The building was to be torn down and asphalted for parking. Though we had a talented and connected performing arts community — community concerts, Billings Symphony, Studio Theater, local performers, writers, presenters, patrons, and participants of all kinds — we were faced with limited performance space and certainly not much technical rigging to attract traveling shows. There was urgency."

The project totaled \$5.3 million, about a third of what they would need to build new at that time.

"There was commitment and vision," said Miller. "This theater would spark energy in downtown. It would anchor touring companies to route to a region marked by Minneapolis, Spokane and Denver." And, there was hope that investing in downtown would spur further development and growth in the area.

Yet, the costs to bring the theater to its original state were deemed too high.

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"The overarching goal was to encourage a culturally relevant city with a strengthened downtown core," said Don Olsen, of O2 Architects, who was on the city council at that time. "The Fox was much more convenient than architecturally significant."

Christene Meyers, the arts and travel editor for The Billings Gazette, who was also part of the Save the Fox committee, wrote at the time, "the building is neither a parking lot nor a bank, and for that we can all be grateful."

The Bair family

On the corner of North Broadway and Third Avenue North, the theater sits on land that was originally owned by Charles M. Bair, who came to Montana in 1883 working as a conductor for the railroad. He then became one of the region's first sheep ranchers and wool producers. He was involved in the coal industry, Alaska's gold rush, and founded Midland Bank in Billings, among other enterprises.

Bair and his wife Mary had two daughters, Alberta and Marguerite, and they maintained residences in Portland, Billings and a ranch in Martinsdale. The Bair family fortune was shared with museums and hospitals across Montana. Alberta, who was unmarried and lived to age 97, was the last surviving member of the family and continued that tradition. She had a deep affection for Billings, and because she grew up in the area where the theater now stands, she was long interested in the future of the building. In 1984, after donating \$625,000 — the largest single amount for the campaign — the Fox Theater was officially renamed for her.

Reopened as the Alberta Bair Theater on Jan. 24, 1987, the focus heightened on courting traveling productions, theater, and live concerts. Local arts and dance organizations, including the Billings Symphony, the Billings Community Band, and Rimrock Opera, also continued to use the stage.

"Alberta would be proud," said Miller, founding board member, of the newly renovated theater, 30-some years later. "She always said when responding to a request, 'It had better make cents.'"

Angew, who initially approached Alberta in the 1980s with a group of about seven others to ask her about funding the theater, described Alberta as a delightful lady.

"I'd never ask her for money again," he laughed. "We just would talk away. She had

more stories. She really loved the theater."

Though Bair, who passed away in 1993, was touted as the final push for the building, donors ranged from those contributing \$10 to a community campaign to major backers including area banks, The Billings Gazette, and others invested in artistic improvements to the city. The purchase of the building was also facilitated by tax increment financing, and the building became a city property, leased back to the newly established Alberta Bair Theater organization for \$1 per year.

The Charles M. Bair Family Trust was a major donor to the 2020 renovation, providing a gift of \$2.5 million in Dec. 2017, ensuring the theater will retain the name of Alberta Bair. Other significant donations include a \$1 million gift from private donors Jim and Chris Scott, the largest private donation in the organization's history. Jim is a founding board member of the ABT and chair of the board at First Interstate BancSystem Inc. The downtown banking community has been generous to the campaign, with Stockman Bank giving \$285,000 toward the campaign and First Interstate Bank and Foundation donating \$250,000. Support has also come from the city, which approved a \$3.5 million TIF allocation in July 2017 from the downtown fund.

Board members, individual donors, community groups and grants have also supported the project. Dietrich said they're about \$250,000 shy of meeting the \$13.6 million mark and have launched a name-a-seat campaign to spur additional donations.

The next generation

Nearly half of the funds raised for renovations went to sound, lighting, and technology enhancements, as well as a new rigging system to accommodate large stage productions, new boilers, updating the electrical system and bringing the building to code for the Americans with Disabilities act. An elevator was added to the facility, as well as an ADA accessible dressing room on the main floor, seating in the balcony to accommodate patrons with disabilities, and four unisex ADA bathrooms on the main floor.

Dan Dooley, of Langlas & Associates Inc. and superintendent of the renovation, said some of the most significant changes took place backstage, where the original roof deck 80 feet above the stage had to be removed to accommodate the new rigging.

"There was 100,000 pounds of concrete that had to be chipped out by hand," Dooley said. There's also 40,000 feet of cable running through the theater and plenty of attention

to technology details — most of which the public won't see but will get to experience.

"You'll see the new seats, the new cheek walls, but all that stuff that makes it work, you don't see that," Dooley said.

What you will see is a nod to the building's roots throughout design, a mix of clean and contemporary lines alongside a vintage art deco vibe. Interior designer Madeline Rajtar with Cushing Terrell, architects for the renovation, said the goal was to create a "welcoming theater experience for the next generation, while referencing and acknowledging the past generations."

The only remaining features of the historic theater — ornate terracotta panels and chevron detailing on the exterior brick wall — became the design inspiration, Rajtar described.

The selected palette is understated with muted copper and blue colors slinking among punches of red in the main theater.

"The color palette of the building interior is modest," said Rajtar. "Within the theater, a classic theatre red captures the pageantry of theatrical performances — a nod of respect to decades before."

Dimensional white tile along the concession areas with black edging adds elegance, with honeycomb tile accents

around the marble-backed concession areas, as well as large tiles mimicking the exterior chevron details, a style traditionally found in the art deco era.

Gone is the 1980s kitschy palette of rosy pinks and greens in the main theater, replaced with near-black walls to give the space a performative focus. Red cheek walls to help absorb sound are accented with minimal black lines.

Fixtures throughout also hark back to the pops of light throughout the original building. Bulbous lighting illuminates the facility, including a "starry night" ceiling in the old theater lobby and an enormous chandelier in the new mingling area created when the building was bumped out.

"We are dressed up with no place to go," lamented Agnew.

In the interim, staff plan to begin testing the systems and dial in operations, said Alex Heyneman, a technical consultant for the theater.

"The theater's capacity for being flexible is incredibly expanded. We need to be able to support any kind of variety of things that are coming," Heyneman said. "They'll be back. It's too bad that we can't open, but we can

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Congratulations

Alberta Bair Theater



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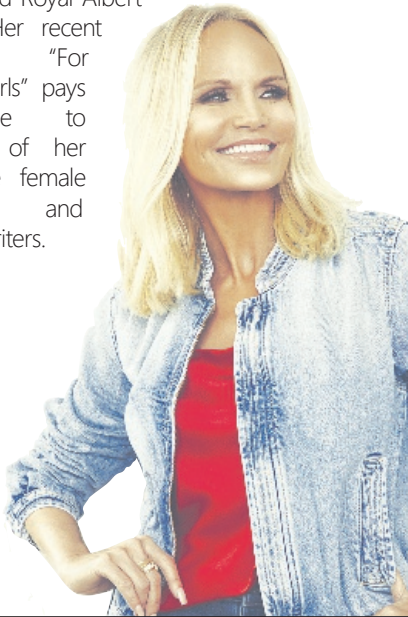
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Meet Kristin Chenoweth

Emmy and Tony Award winning actress and singer Kristin Chenoweth's career spans film, television, voiceover, and stage. Chenoweth has received a coveted star on The Hollywood Walk of Fame, an Emmy Award for Best Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series for her role in "Pushing Daisies," a Tony Award for "You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown," and she was nominated for her original role of Glinda the Good Witch in "Wicked." Chenoweth was nominated for two Emmy Awards and for a People's Choice Award for her role on "Glee." In 2009, she wrote an upliftingly candid, comedic chronicle of her life so far, "A Little Bit Wicked," which debuted on the New York Times Hardcover Non-Fiction Best Seller List. She can currently be seen in Apple TV+'s musical comedy series "Schmigadoon" and recently starred in the Netflix film "Holidate." Chenoweth has performed to sold-out audiences across the world, including performances at Carnegie Hall and Royal Albert

Hall. Her recent album "For The Girls" pays homage to some of her favorite female singers and songwriters.



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work through some things and get this fine-tuned before those events come."

The theater brings about \$4.5 million into the Billings economy a year, said Dietrich, citing a 2015 study by the Americans for the Arts in similar sized communities. And she's optimistic that the touring arts industry will return.

Miller described this expanded capacity

an important part of the local economy. "A quality performance space also encourages musicians and artists to be here, and I like to think has contributed to the vibrant and diverse music community that enlivens downtown Billings, even when we are allowed to be out and gathering."

Eventually, the shows will go on. "Hopefully by then, Broadway shows will be touring and we will be back to a reasonably normal life," Agnew added. "I don't expect to see it for a year or two, but I think we can weather that storm."

Alberta Bair Theater's 2021-22 Season

September 18: Kristin Chenoweth

September 21: John Driskell Hopkins Band

October 1: Quarteto Nuevo

October 28: National Geographic Live: Ocean Soul with Brian Skerry

November 6: Raul Midón

December 2: The Simon & Garfunkel Story

December 31: Big Bad Voodoo Daddy

January 28: National Geographic Live: View From Above with Terry Virts

February 2: compagnie Hervé Koubi

February 18: The Choir of Man

February 26: International Guitar Night

March 2: Roald Dahl's Charlie and The Chocolate Factory

March 6: Nobuntu

March 18: National Geographic Live: Untamed with Felipe DeAndrade

March 19: The British Invasion

March 27: Beautiful – The Carole King Musical

March 30: The Magic of Bill Blagg Live

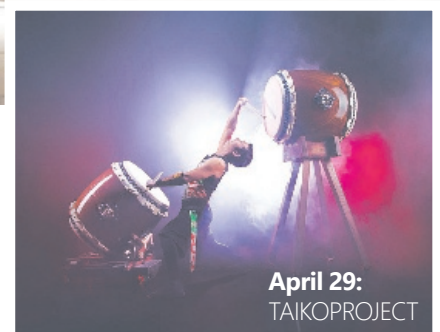
April 1: Aquila Theatre: Shakespeare's Macbeth



February 2:
compagnie
Hervé Koubi

April 29: TAIKOPROJECT

Information for each performance can be found on the ABT website albertabairtheater.org or by calling the box office at 406-256-6052.



April 29:
TAIKOPROJECT

Congratulations

1233 Cordova St.
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2021-22 Reopening Season: Fall
ABT Box Office: M-F 10-5 | (406) 256.6052

www.AlbertaBairTheater.org

Visit ABT website for all upcoming events!



SEPT 18, 8:00
KRISTIN CHENOWETH

Emmy and Tony Award winning actress and singer Kristin Chenoweth has performed to sold-out audiences across the world, including performances at Carnegie Hall and Royal Albert Hall.

Her career spans film, television, voiceover and stage. Her latest album *For The Girls* is a heartfelt tribute to the great female singers throughout history. Join us as we officially reopen Alberta Bair Theater to the public!



SEPT 21, 7:30
JOHN DRISKELL HOPKINS
 OF
ZAC BROWN BAND

Best known as a founding member, multi-instrumentalist, and songwriter with Zac Brown Band, John

Driskell Hopkins works out of his Brighter Shade Studios songwriting and producing a growing crop of talent when he's not touring with ZBB. Hopkins continues to perform across the country with his original six-piece band, the John Driskell Hopkins Band. Come hear them LIVE on stage!



OCT 1, 7:30 pm
QUARTETO NUEVO

Quarteto Nuevo merges western classical, eastern European folk, Latin, and jazz with an organic feel that packs a wallop! The ensemble's

razor-sharp precision is enhanced by jazzy interludes, lightly rumbling percussion motifs, and mesmerizing rhythms. They effectively meld the music of ancient worlds and faraway places with a contemporary groove.



OCT 28, 7:30
BRIAN SKERRY:
OCEAN SOUL

Wildlife photographer Brian Skerry has spent more than four decades exploring the world's oceans. His images illuminate the mystery of the depths and offer portraits of creatures so intimate they sometimes appear to have been shot in a studio.

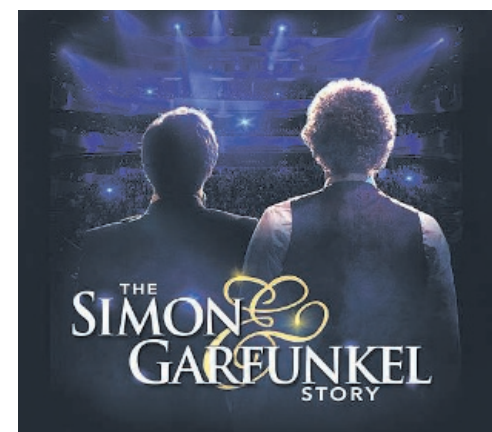


MAURICIO HANDLER



NOV 6, 7:30
RAUL MIDÓN

Along with 10 studio albums, Grammy nominated Raul Midón—dubbed “an eclectic adventurer” by *People* magazine—has collaborated with such heroes as Herbie Hancock and Stevie Wonder, along with contributing to recordings by Queen Latifah, and Snoop Dogg. Midón has earned acclaim the world over, with a fanbase that stretches from San Francisco to India, Amsterdam to Tokyo.



DEC 2, 7:30

This concert-style theater show uses huge projection photos, original film footage, and a full live band performing all the hits (“Mrs. Robinson,” “Cecilia,” “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” and more!) to chronicle the amazing journey shared by the folk-rock duo, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel. Limited number of VIP experience and merchandise upgrades available!

