

# *The Maryland Theatre Takes Center Stage in Hagerstown*



Hagerstown, Maryland has long been known as the “Hub City,” where multiple railroad lines converge like the spokes of a wagon wheel. Since their arrival in the mid-1800s, the Western Maryland, Baltimore & Ohio, and Chesapeake & Ohio railroads have served as engines of the local economy in the tristate region of Maryland, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Today Hagerstown continues to serve as a commercial and industrial “Hub City” at the crossroads of I-70 and I-81. The region is among the fastest growing in the United States.

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*Photography provided by The Maryland Theatre*

“Hagerstown is the hub of all things – culture, business, government, arts, entertainment, education and recreation,” says Jessica Green, executive director of the Maryland Theatre, which is centrally located downtown at 21 South Potomac Street. The Theatre serves as the anchor of Hagerstown’s Arts & Entertainment district, as well as the home of the Washington County Arts Council, Maryland Symphony Orchestra, City Ballet School, Miss Maryland Scholarship Pageant and the Barbara Ingram School of the Arts. Since 2009, the Ingram School has served as the first magnet high school for the visual and performing arts in Washington County and Western Maryland.



**Above: The beautiful grand staircase leading to the Cocktail Lounge and theatre balcony.**

**Right: At the Maryland Theatre, five multi-use spaces are available for rent, such as the 2nd floor Cocktail Lounge. This 2020 Washington County Chamber of Commerce Business Awards event included all four floors of food and drink prior to awards in the auditorium.**



“The Theatre is an historic landmark that celebrates the arts,” Jessica says. “It makes the Hagerstown community a place you’d want to live in. There’s something for everyone.” An estimated 100,000 people, plus 12,000 local students, visit the Theater annually to enjoy concerts featuring music of every genre, comedians, recitals, plays and children’s shows. Comfortable seating for 1,300 includes accommodations for seven wheelchairs. Big names who have appeared include BB King, George Carlin, The Temptations, Diamond Rio, Billy Rae Cyrus and Jay Leno. The Theatre also welcomes private events ranging from business-related events to educational offerings to family celebrations.

The Maryland Theatre Association, Inc., an independent non-profit organization, supports the Theatre as an historic property that provides quality educational and cultural programming to the Hagerstown community and beyond. About 5,000 volunteers provide additional support and staff the Concession Area.

Originally a Vaudeville House, the Maryland Theatre was built in 1915 for about \$200,000. That’s about \$5.1 million in 2020 dollars. Its design was a collaborative effort between Hagerstown’s Harry E. Yessler and New York City’s Thomas W. Lamb, renowned for his work on Madison Square Garden,

the Hippodrome and theaters in England, Egypt, India and South Africa. Those fortunate enough to attend the first, sold-out performance on May 10, 1915, enjoyed live orchestra music and a five-reel film entitled, “The Commuters.” General admission was 10 cents and box seats were 35 cents. When sound became available in 1927, the Theatre installed new seating and began showing movies that often attracted around 1,000 patrons on weekends and 600-700 on weekdays. Admission rose to 40 cents. From 1930 – 1969, the Theatre was owned by Warner Brothers and related



companies. In 1974, a fire destroyed the front of the Theatre, where the lobby is now located, and apartments above. Fortunately the historic auditorium escaped unscathed. But the Theatre gradually deteriorated until Gerald N. Minnich, a local funeral director, purchased it in 1976 just before it was to be sold to a contractor interested in its one million bricks. “Citizens to Save The Maryland Theatre,” a community group led by local businessman Jack Garrott, came to the rescue by coordinating donations of supplies, services and funds that resulted in a grand re-opening in 1978. The Theatre celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2015 with a major restoration that included upgraded seating, flooring, HVAC system, plaster repairs, fire protection and updates to the backstage.

Meanwhile, in 2011, Hagerstown officials and business leaders collaborated to create a Smart Growth community revitalization plan for the city’s urban core, in recognition of Hagerstown’s role as the region’s economic, institutional and cultural center. After approval by the State of Maryland and input from the community, the Community City Center Plan evolved as a 10-year roadmap for the implementation of eight projects to serve as catalysts for development in the area.

In recognition of the Maryland Theatre’s significance and contributions to the Hagerstown and surrounding communities, the Maryland Theatre Expansion Project was designated as the Plan’s Catalyst Project #2. Its primary goal: to expand the draw of downtown’s largest attraction by increasing performance days from 150 to 225, and attracting 60,000 or more patrons per year.

Executing such an ambitious plan involved the implementation of detailed, annual steps. The resulting transformation of the Theatre has been comprehensive. Enhancements include a new entrance, additional performance space, improved seating within the theatre, better backstage accessibility and conditions, box office space, a conference room, and new offices for local partner organizations. A spacious rehearsal area on the third floor replicates the auditorium stage, complete with changing facilities, and serves as an area for rehearsals or classes with connectivity to the Washington County Public School System. Five multi-use spaces are available for rent. On the fourth floor, the Dr. George and Connie Manger Ballroom overlooks Potomac Street and offers a rare view of the mountains beyond Hagerstown.

“This expansion is a drastic change for the audience,” Jessica says. “Improvements include four entrances – or five, if you count the VIP suite – and 17 restrooms. Overall, it



**Top: The Historic Auditorium with stage view from the balcony.**

**Above: The Grand Lobby during the 2020 Chamber of Commerce event.**

provides audiences with a better experience. It has been a long time in the works. The timing worked out well, with support from local government, donors and the community.” On October 11, 2019, an official ribbon-cutting ceremony was held to celebrate the completion of the Maryland Theatre Expansion Project.

The Maryland Theatre is on the map. “We can compete with DC and Baltimore, with the benefit of convenience for local patrons,” Jessica says. “Our guests come from Washington, Frederick, Allegany, and Mineral Counties, as well as nearby Pennsylvania counties. There’s something for everyone.”

Meanwhile, the Theatre continues to fulfill its commitment to its core audience, the residents of Hagerstown and surrounding area. Jessica says, “We’re right here, in your community, in an iconic building that celebrates the arts. We want to make the community a place where people want to live. The future of the Theatre is bright. We’ll celebrate our 105<sup>th</sup> this year.”

For more information, visit The Maryland Theatre web site at [www.mdtheatre.org](http://www.mdtheatre.org) or call 301-790-2000.