

Round UP

NEW MINOWA PLAYERS (NMP) OF DECORAH ON THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY THEATRE, ANNOUNCEMENT OF 2023/24 SCHEDULE, HISTORY, PANDEMIC, FUNDING AND MORE



NEW MINOWA
PLAYERS

Round Up for NMP June 12 - 26

Responses for this Co-op Q&A submitted by Sheryl Scheffert on behalf of NMP

OCC: Could you please share the various productions that New Minowa Players (NMP) presents to theatre-goers on an annual basis?

NMP: New Minowa Players presents six shows per year. Each time slot has a descriptor, and each year a show is chosen to fit within the category. Because our season starts after the summer musical, we have one show left in the current season – “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” – and we have a 2023-24 season ready to be publicized. Here are the descriptors of each time slot and what audiences will see in the coming year:

The season starts in August with our Young People’s Production. “Young People” refers to actors in junior high, high school, and college. This August it will be “Carrie: The Musical.”

In October we have our children’s show, for actors in first through eighth grades. The 2023 Children’s Show will be “Two Stories About a Gold Buckskin Whincher.” This is a locally-written musical based on the Carl Sandburg story.

Co-op shoppers are invited to “Round Up at the Register” for New Minowa Players of Decorah Monday, June 12 through Monday, June 26. The mission of this local nonprofit is “building community by entertaining, educating and enriching participants and audiences of all ages through diverse theatrical experiences.” New Minowa Players will present “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” this month; performances are scheduled June 22-25. Tickets may be purchased online at <https://www.newminowaplayers.org/> or at the Decorah High School box office from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. during show week.

On “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” - from Director Cydney Weitzel:

“I’ve been in love with this piece of theatre ever since the original cast album dropped in 2016. This stage adaptation of “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” features (and expands on) the soaring Menken/Schwartz score from Disney’s 1996 animated film, with the dark story more closely derived from the original 1831 Victor Hugo novel (who also wrote “Les Miserables”). Hugo’s novel lauded Notre Dame Cathedral as a character in its own right, giving focus to the timelessness of the structure and its quiet presence, watching over the pitfalls of humanity throughout history. This stage adaptation develops this theme, with additional focus on tragic romance, the concept of “other” and this question: what makes a monster and what makes a man?”

The cast consists of two exciting ensembles. One is a group of active storytellers aptly termed The Congregation; the other is the Cathedral Choir, which serves as the “essence” of Notre Dame and augments this production’s powerful vocals. Together, they perform in story theatre format as a troupe, presenting this story within the walls of Notre Dame itself and using themselves and what props they may have around them for story delivery. I feel this transparent approach is powerful. It inspires fluid and creative storytelling, and it invites the audience to use their imagination - to feel like they are a participant in shaping the story. This inclusive format fosters the show’s themes of love and acceptance of the “other” within society - and its corruption. These themes are relevant today. Shows such as this may elicit reflection and senses of urgency and agency. We are reminded how we, through our individual actions, can address discrimination in our midst and change the world for the betterment of all.

It’s my directorial debut with NMP, and I couldn’t be more grateful for the cast and crew that joined me in telling this beautiful story. It’s been a huge undertaking, which this cast and crew have approached with joy. Their talent, focus and grace has surpassed my wildest expectations on what this show could be in our small city of Decorah, Iowa. We are so thrilled to share it with you! We invite all to check our Facebook and Instagram pages for production progress photos and videos.”



Photos of NMP's current production are courtesy of the organization.

While our youngest actors are busy preparing for their show, older folks are also busy preparing for the November show. This time slot is labeled "Creative Venture," and has ranged from musicals to one-acts, reader's theatre, and cabaret performances. This November there will be a cabaret celebrating the fact that it will be our 200th performance!

Our January show is designated as a family show. It is often based on children's literature and can be either a musical or a straight play. January 2024 will bring "Disney's Descendants: The Musical."

Spring brings a very open category. This season the show will be the musical "Fun Home."

And, that brings us back to summer, when we do our big summer musical on the Decorah High School stage. The 2024 summer musical will be "Bright Star."

OCC: How are these shows determined?

NMP: New Minowa Players is governed by a board of directors, all volunteers, and one of their jobs is to choose the shows. A call is put out in early spring saying that anyone who wants to direct during the coming year should submit a proposal. The proposal forms are available at <https://www.newminowaplayers.org/> and could be filled out at any time, but March 30 is the deadline to apply for the following year. People who apply to direct a performance propose the show they want to direct, in addition to giving other information. So, when the board looks at the applications, they are considering a combination of a specific director linked to a specific show. Part of the decision process is creating a season that flows well for the organization.

OCC: How is all of this magic funded?

NMP: It takes money, of course, and ticket prices only pay part of the actual cost of keeping the organization thriving. Our two consistent funding sources are from memberships and sponsorships. Annual memberships start at \$25 for a family. Memberships become part of our cash flow, used for anything from set building to paying the water bill. Sponsorships are donations collected each year which specifically help to offset the cost of royalties for the shows that are performed. In addition to memberships and sponsorships, we gratefully accept donations, we seek out grants for specific projects, and we are thrilled to be part of this year's "Round Up at the Register" program here at the Co-op. We are thankful for the many ways the round-up options have helped wonderful organizations in our community, too. Thank you for all the work you do with that.

OCC: Could you please share NMP's journey through the first three years of the pandemic (2020-2023)?

NMP: Those were hard years for all of us, weren't they? And, while no one suggests that organizational and business challenges are in the same category as personal



losses, it took creative maneuvering and the good will of many people to get us through. We simply canceled our spring and summer shows in 2020. By August we were doing things online. When summer 2021 rolled around, we staged two shows outdoors, and beginning in the fall we moved back inside, masked. Thankfully, our sponsors and members continued supporting the organization even when no tickets were being sold.



OCC: What is the value of community theatre?

NMP: Wow, with no word limit?! I'll be brief, but there's a lot to say. Community theatre adds value to the lives of performers, to the lives of audience members, and to the general well-being of our region. Those who choose to be involved, both on stage and off, become part of an energized, caring community. People pour their hearts into creating a show, and part of that process is lifting each other up. It's only when each person is encouraged and emboldened to reach their own potential that the show itself grows into a magical thing.

Then the audience comes, and not only are they carried in whatever direction the specific plot takes them, they are also, I think, buoyed by the community which the cast and production team has created. The availability of community theatre adds to the richness of life in northeast Iowa and southeast Minnesota by bolstering skills, by creating discussions, by helping people step into new places, and by being a welcoming presence.

OCC: NMP will celebrate its 50th in 2025; wow! Could you please tell readers about its founding, growth, struggles and achievements?

NMP: The organization was started in 1975 by Bette Greedy, who was quickly joined by a group of local thespians wanting to share their passion with others. Bette secured enough money to stage the first show, a musical called "Little Mary Sunshine." The show was performed in Ye Olde Barn Theatre on the edge of Decorah, where the new Sunflower building is being erected. The barn was not entirely waterproof, and this propelled the group to look for other locations. During the early years, NMP performed shows in such diverse places as The Elks Club and Nob Hill (now Good Dog Center). Over time, though, the need for a permanent home grew.

In 1981, a major fundraising campaign allowed NMP to purchase the current building at 906 South Mill Street in Decorah, but at first it was not a performance space.

For the next two decades, NMP presented two to four shows per year. There was usually a summer musical, provided first at Decorah Middle School and later at Decorah High School. All other shows were performed in local restaurants as dinner theater. In 2004 the Young People's Production was added to the annual calendar of shows, and in 2006 the January show was added.



Later that year the Children's Show was added, replacing one of the adult shows.

The board approved construction of a stage and risers in 2006, and members went to work the very next day. It is great to have a space of our own. It is all a testament to the time, energy, and generosity of the many people who value having New Minowa Players in our community.

There will no doubt be a great celebration when we arrive at our 50th anniversary in 2025! Keep up with the details of this, join NMP, and view other NMP news, at <https://www.newminowaplayers.org/>.