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Votes for shows get patrons in on the act

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The Omaha Community Playhouse says it's sticking with what works during tough economic times.

Announcing its 86th season Tuesday night at a patron party, the playhouse said it chose seven of its 11 shows for next season based on customer preferences.

Two more announced shows, "A Christmas Carol" and a musical revue by Billy McGuigan, have been playhouse fixtures at holiday time for years.

Playhouse Artistic Director Carl Beck said those who attended shows at the playhouse last fall filled out thousands of ballots.

Beck called the ballot approach to choosing a season "a completely different way of doing things than the last 25 years," when a play-reading committee chose the shows. This year the committee instead helped pick titles to list on the ballots.

While the playhouse asked patrons to help choose musicals for this season ("Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," "Quilters," "Fiddler on the Roof"), it offered ballots for 2010-11 on both musicals and comedy-drama scripts, listing a dozen or more titles in each category.

"We expected the votes to be all over the map," Beck said before the party, "but the voting actually clarified itself early on. 'Footloose' was easily No.1 among the shows people wanted to see."

"Footloose," based on the 1984 hit movie about a boy who comes to a small town and shakes up the status quo, will kick off the main-stage season in the Howard and Rhonda Hawks Theatre in September. Other main-stage musicals will be "Nunsense," opening in March, and Frank Loesser's classic "Guys and Dolls," capping the season in late May.

Another patron favorite, musical "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," will open in the smaller Howard Drew Theatre in February.

Comedies and dramas picked from the ballot are Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple," slated for January, and Robert Harling's "Steel Magnolias," opening in April, both for the main stage; and "Tuesdays With Morrie," based on Mitch Albom's popular book, opening in late April in the Howard Drew.

In searching for a classic play to help anchor the season, Beck said, the committee "spent a lot of time reading older scripts, deciding which were worth reinventing or reviving."

Herb Gardner's "A Thousand Clowns" was a strong favorite among all age demographics on the committee, including 20-somethings who had not read or seen it before. The play, about a nonconformist who quits his job while raising a precocious nephew, will open in the Howard Drew in October.

The season's only new title, not chosen by patrons, is David Rambo's "The Lady With All the Answers," which kicks off the season Aug. 20.

Drawn from the letters and life of Ann Landers, the one-woman show was a hit for Judith Ivey off Broadway.

"I've been paying attention to that one," said Susan Baer Collins, the playhouse's associate director. "You forget how much of an innovator Ann was."

Collins said the play recalls Landers coming out against the Vietnam war, and writing about premarital sex and homosexuality many years ago, when those were taboo topics.

Beck said the current season, chosen with maximum audience appeal in mind, has been a success. Season membership and individual ticket sales are both up significantly, he said.

“Until this system proves inaccurate or takes us in a wrong direction, this seems the way to go for this theater, in this economic climate,” Beck said of the patron ballots.

Season ticket prices are expected to rise slightly, after being cut 7 percent to 15 percent last year. The new prices will still be below 2008-09 levels, said Lanelle Poole, box office manager. A 10-show pass was \$185 for adults and \$120 for students this season, while a four-show package was \$85 for adults, \$70 for students.

Season ticket holders will get brochures in the mail soon.

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