

WESTPORT COUNTRY PLAYHOUSE

NEWS RELEASE

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Westport Country Playhouse Artistic Director Mark Shanahan Gives Update on Historic Theatre's Transition and Future

“Our theater offers one of the last ‘non-downloadable’ experiences—a place for the creation of community, shared stories, and collective growth,” said Shanahan.

Westport Country Playhouse's trustees one year ago launched a plan to reinvent the historic theatre. To ensure the continuation of the more than 90-year-old Playhouse in the wake of the pandemic's impact, they made the critical decision to transition into a center for performing arts events that appeal to a broader audience while placing on temporary hold traditional theatre productions.

Looking back on the trajectory since summer 2023, Mark Shanahan, Westport Country Playhouse artistic director, shared his thoughts on where the Playhouse stands today and its plan for the future.

“I can happily report that our new hybrid model of presented works and home-made productions has energized our artistic efforts and welcomed our audience back in droves,” said Shanahan. “But it's just a starting point for our growth.”

The past season saw more programming than ever before in Playhouse history with a spate of one-night-only performances by artists such as Mandy Patinkin, Audra McDonald, Bernadette Peters, Patti LuPone, The Bacon Brothers, Judy Collins, and Mike Birbiglia, and short-run theatrical presentations, like “A Sherlock Carol,” “All Things Equal: The Life and Trials of Ruth Bader Ginsburg” and “They Made It A Musical!” Many were underwritten to help offset costs.

“Though several short-run plays have been presented in the past year, a fully produced season was put on hiatus until this fall as we did, and continue to do, necessary and responsible fundraising to mount our upcoming productions,” Shanahan stated. “Through wise decisions on programming and fundraising over the past year, we are now ready to resume a full season of in-house productions.”

“A Season of Laughter” Opens in October

Shanahan heralded the return of the Playhouse's theatre season beginning in October and running through April, featuring three Playhouse-produced plays, for three weeks each, and two shorter-run productions, including a holiday offering and a musical revue. At the end of April and through summer 2025, a myriad of special events will again populate the Playhouse calendar, followed by another theatre season from fall through spring.

“We are excited to be offering a thoughtfully curated slate of plays,” noted Shanahan about what he has named “A Season of Laughter.” “These aren't just any comedies - they are smart, sophisticated works that bring humor to important and timely issues. While these productions are filled with humor, they each address larger themes that will resonate with our audiences, as we spark conversations about personal transformation, cultural and political divides, and the importance of finding common ground.”

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The 2024-25 season lineup includes “The 39 Steps,” a fast-paced frenzy of espionage and murderous mayhem, playing from October 22 through November 9; “Native Gardens,” an outrageous comedy about well-intentioned neighbors who become feuding enemies, February 18 through March 8; and “Theatre People,” a throwback to the classic screwball comedies of yesteryear, March 25 through April 12. Rounding out the season are two shorter-run productions - “A Sherlock Carol,” returning for its second year by popular demand, will offer a family friendly holiday show that is part mystery, part ghost-story, December 17 through 22; and “Broadway Scores at the Playhouse,” a concert of favorite Broadway show tunes, January 23 through 26. For complete 2024-25 season details, visit: <https://www.westportplayhouse.org/2024-2025-season/>

“Each show we create carries a message that we hope resonates deeply with our audience,” Shanahan emphasized. “At its heart, a thriving theater is an essential part of a healthy community, a place where thoughts are shared, and laughter, often in short supply these days, can spark change, inspire conversation, and build bridges.”

New Programs Expand Audiences

Shanahan reported that in the past year, brand-new programs have sprung up that will remain on the Playhouse calendar, including the Barnstormer Series, using the Lucille Lortel Barn for smaller-sized events like Grammy-nominated Sophie B. Hawkins’ recent concert of new material; The Playhouse Sings, aimed at attracting younger audiences with the music of Taylor Swift and many more of today’s pop sensations; and film screenings followed by artist discussions, such as Sharon Washington’s award-winning documentary, “When My Sleeping Dragon Woke.”

A Reach Committee was formed to extend the arm of the Playhouse in surrounding towns through programming that encourages diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as Ari Axelrod in “A Place for Us: A Celebration of Jewish Broadway,” in partnership with the Anti-defamation League CT; and a salute to the international non-profit, “Girl Rising,” through conversations with Indigenous, female climate activists. This fall will see the launch of Playhouse Playmakers, a theatre education program for middle school students.

The long-standing Script in Hand playreading series and Family Festivities shows have been maintained in the programming mix. “Our season should ALWAYS offer something a parent or grandparent can bring a young theatregoer to so they may experience the arts,” Shanahan promised.

But Shanahan highlighted that the Playhouse is not simply producing entertainment. “It is serving as a cultural hub where important social work happens and where meaningful dialogue thrives. Our theater offers one of the last ‘non-downloadable’ experiences—a place for the creation of community, shared stories, and collective growth.”

“It is the future of the institution that excites us most.”

While Shanahan is mindful of audience expectations, he makes it clear that the Playhouse must constantly face financial realities. Ticket sales only tackle a small percentage of what it costs to keep a non-profit theater running. “With no dedicated federal assistance for the arts in America, as there often is in other countries, a theater like ours will always rely on fundraising if it is to continue,” Shanahan said.

Helping to maintain the fundraising momentum is an upcoming benefit, “The Best Is Yet to Come,” on Saturday, September 14. The fundraiser will pay tribute to Cy Coleman’s music, while honoring Tony Award-winning Broadway star Kristin Chenoweth and Drama Desk Award-winning music director Mary-Mitchell Campbell, who will perform, along with other artists. Benefit host is Oscar winner F. Murray Abraham.

“Engaging new donors and constantly inviting their participation is crucial if we are to ensure that every generation inherits a healthy theater from those who came before,” Shanahan added. “An investment in

keeping the theater thriving now is an investment in the promise of its future. We invite our donors to become caretakers and stewards of this institution. While I know we all love the cherished history of our theatre, I believe it is the future of this institution that excites us most.”

The Playhouse is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. Westport Country Playhouse 2024 Programming and Season Sponsor is Barbara Streicker. Media sponsors are Moffly Media and WSHU Public Radio.

A complete schedule of Playhouse events is available at westportplayhouse.org. All play titles, artists, dates, and times are subject to change.

For Westport Country Playhouse information and tickets, visit westportplayhouse.org or call the box office at (203) 227-4177, toll-free at 1-888-927-7529. Stay connected to the Playhouse on Facebook (Westport Country Playhouse), Instagram ([wcplayhouse](https://www.instagram.com/wcplayhouse)), and YouTube ([WestportPlayhouse](https://www.youtube.com/WestportPlayhouse)). Westport Country Playhouse is located at 25 Powers Court, off Route 1, Westport.

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