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EXCLUSIVE

The show will go on

By ABRA BENNETT for the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

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The Gesa Power House Theatre, 111 N. Sixth Ave., has transitioned to nonprofit ownership this summer.

Photo courtesy of the Gesa Power House Theatre

The pandemic may have temporarily shuttered Walla Walla's Gesa Power House Theatre, but its progress on achieving long-term goals hasn't stopped.

While the theater hasn't been able to stage its usual eclectic playlist of performances such as *Sleeping Beauty*, *Menopause the Musical*, *Beaver Believers* and *Paula Poundstone*, the institution has taken a big step into the future this summer by realizing its dream of becoming a nonprofit.

The founding organization, a limited liability company, was established in 2011, when it purchased and converted the old Electric Light Works Building at 111 N. Sixth Ave. into a modern, performing arts venue.

The founding members invested more than \$3.9 million in the theater, with the goal of ultimately transitioning it to nonprofit status.

“It was never intended for this LLC to be a long-term business solution for the theater but to spearhead this initial phase of the project. Performance venues are rarely privately owned,” according to the news release Thursday.

Although tax-exempt nonprofit status was approved in 2016, the transition was delayed by the unexpected loss of founder Mark Anderson. The original investment — including the building — has now been transferred to the nonprofit.

Founders Patty Anderson and Donna and Dennis Ledford will remain involved in the theater. The nonprofit board members are John Jamison, president; Karl Eckhardt, treasurer; Amy Watkins, secretary; and members Jim Barrow, Michelle Conner, Ted Cox, Jim Michelson and Erica Walter.

“The day-to-day operations of the theater and events will continue, only interrupted as they have been by COVID-19,” said Jamison. “The main difference will be in having an active board with the ability to tap into new fundraising methods.”

One benefit of the new status might be a reduction in some ticket prices.

“We may be able to offer more affordable ticket options in the future,” said Heather Schermann, the theater manager. “With access to new funding options, and with the continued support of local businesses as sponsors, we are hoping to offer more options for an affordable night out in Walla Walla.”

Donna Ledford has been appointed the executive director of the new nonprofit.



“While this organizational change has been in the works for several years, we are excited that this phase is completed,” she said. “We now look forward to the work that is to come — maintaining operations, expanding our education and volunteer programs, identifying new grant opportunities and fundraising.”

The new status broadens the options for community participation in the theater.

“We will be expanding our volunteer program to include many more opportunities beyond ushering for a show,” Ledford added. “If you have a skill that you would like to offer, please send an email to volunteers@phtww.org.”

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, it is uncertain when the theater will be able to reopen its doors to the public.

According to Schermann, “We are rescheduling our canceled events, and we are exploring other formats for future programming, from virtual and livestreamed events to live and hybrid events (some patrons watch in person, some watch from home). In the meantime, people can join our mailing list at **phtww.org** to receive a weekly e-mail with free arts and entertainment options they can watch at home.”