

From the stage to both sides of the camera, Marquee finds 'blessing in disguise' during COVID

Blessings might wear disguises, so it is a good thing Aurora's Marquee Theatrical Productions has an expansive costume department!

The Industrial Parkway North non-profit, which provides opportunities for local youth and adults alike to tread the boards, may have been without an in-person audience for the better part of a year and a half, but rather than sitting on the sidelines at the ready for the curtain to rise once again, they have taken matters into their own hands.

And a recent grant from Magna's Hoedown Community Fund will help them keep that momentum going.

Marquee was recently named one of 30 community organizations to benefit from the fund, which was established earlier this year in lieu of the Magna Hoedown, which was cancelled once again due to ongoing health concerns related to the global pandemic.

When their traditional performing venues were shuttered as a result of COVID-19, Marquee began the substantial task of adapting their facilities for less traditional fare.

'Until we can do live performances, we have gone into the filming industry,' says Marquee founder Sheryl Thomas. 'We're using green screen technology and basically making movies out of the productions now currently until we can get back on the stage again.'

As far as pivots go, it might not be a temporary one.

Marquee has had to purchase new pieces of equipment to make it happen, a conscious decision taken due to the costs of renting equipment, and that's where Magna's cash infusion has proved both timely and pivotal.

'Some of these pieces will carry over to when we go back to live, microphones and stuff like that; we will be able to use them here for capturing audio but we'll also be able to use them when we go back to the stage. [The Hoedown Grant] is also helping us expand on bringing kids in. What we want to be able to do is get an off-site storage facility so we can empty some of the spaces that are currently housing set pieces, props and set decorations' so we can create another studio space and have another place to have a classroom. That will allow us to have more kids inside and still maintain our six-foot distance and keep everybody safe.'

The learning curve in translating Marquee's signature offerings to a new medium may have been steep, but the youth who thrive in the theatre program have taken on new skills in the process. That, says Ms. Thomas, is a blessing in disguise.

'We didn't expect the video programs to be so popular,' she says. 'At first it was a tough sell because it is different from what we normally do as there's no audience, but what has happened and has been such a success is that once they saw the first output of the whole thing collectively to put it together with the backgrounds, the green screen, the lightbulb moment went off over their heads like, 'I get it now!'

'The kids were still energized by the process and excited to take part. It kept the ball rolling for the creative side of them because the acting component was still there, the dancing components were definitely there, as was the singing. But the singing we had to do creatively because we can't sing inside yet and we have been recording them outside in our tents in a safe, ventilated area and when we film them, they just lip sync to their own backing track. We had to learn and figure out how to work and to keep everyone safe without singing inside.'

Also helping to keep participants safe are new staff members that they were able to bring on through the Canada Summer Jobs program this year, an allocation which Ms. Thomas said was 'substantial.'

?It was incredible because it has actually allowed us to expand our numbers with the student and camper ratio,? she says. ?It allowed us to do more smaller groups of people because we can use the outside during this time of year, which is lovely.?

The new team-members have also proved valuable in Marquee's technological revolution, she says, adding, ?Before that, it was just me making it up as I go; now we have professional people who are from the industry coming in to do the music editing, the camera operating? and all these things help keep us in the game!?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter