

Maplewood Barn Community Theatre  
Columbia, Missouri

There is a kind of magic that happens when we sit together in a theatre. As the stage lights rise, we fly with Snoopy and the Red Baron, pine for love, smile smugly as villains get their just desserts, long for happily ever after, and battle our own inner demons and dragons. It is a mystical, addictive power that holds us entranced and has us returning, again and again.

Oscar Wilde described the theatre as “the greatest of all art forms; the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.” The theatre can be a powerful force. It can change opinions—even change lives—by touching our most basic human need to connect with one another. When you attend a performance, you enter as an individual. But when you leave, you leave as a group, having been bound together by the same experience. Theatre allows us to share stories, imagine other experiences, learn from one another, to laugh, and to cry together. Theatre is a community experience.

The mission of the Maplewood Barn Community Theatre is to provide high quality, live community theatre to mid-Missouri audiences in an informal, family friendly, outdoor setting in historic Nifong Park. The purpose and mission have remained unchanged since the theatre’s founding as a City-sponsored initiative in 1973.

The concept of Arts in the Parks is not new in the United States. The provision of natural and manmade theatres and amphitheatres in major American cities has been actively in process from the late Nineteenth Century. Small towns have had, and many of them now lost, band stands, opera houses, and other forms of public stages upon which the Performing Arts could be demonstrated. In the past two decades, however, the emphasis on municipal park planning and programming has been athletically oriented. A wider public acceptance of and interest in the Arts has now begun to reflect itself in park programming that provides for music, dance, and theatre, in short, the Performing Arts.

Nifong Park was established as a Historical Garden Park for the City of Columbia, Missouri in 1969 with emphasis on cultural areas and activities. In the Columbia Parks and Recreation Master Plan of 1968 the proposed ten-year development plan for the buildings at Nifong Park included a suggestion for use of the barn as a Performing Arts Center. However, the only activity that took place at the barn over the next four years was a Day Camp which used the barn as its headquarters. In the early Spring of 1973 some of the citizens of Columbia began to investigate the progress of the proposed theatre at the barn and found that much ground work needed yet to be laid.

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In March 1973 the Nifong Steering Committee was presented with drawings of a modest renovation program which would enable the Maplewood Barn to offer a performing arts presentation outdoors at Nifong Park in summer 1973. The Nifong Steering Committee (hereafter, NSC) authorized the formation of a fund-raising and programming Advisory Committee of ten Columbia Citizens with a long-term commitment to the Columbia Community and an interest in the development of the Maplewood Barn Theatre. The April NSC meeting approved the duly formed Maplewood Barn Theatre Committee (hereafter, MBTC) and contributed one of its members to serve on the committee.

In its early meeting the Maplewood Barn Theatre Committee (hereafter, MBTC) came to share the idea that the south facade of the Barn with its huge lawn was an ideal natural theatre for dance, drama and music in a beautiful outdoor setting. It was felt that unless a move was made to begin long range development of such a facility at the site the barn would be “programmed” for another kind of activity. Indeed, it was learned that there was discussion of the barn being used as a farm implement museum. It was recognized that the community needed a quality performing arts outlet which was not directly affiliated with the academic institutions of Columbia, the University of Missouri, Stephens College, and Columbia College. The MBTC wanted to establish a theatre in the community which could serve family audiences. They wanted to make a place for the performing arts in the program and facilities of the Columbia Parks and Recreation Department. They wanted to enhance the loveliness of Nifong Park by bringing a quality performing arts program into it, thus encouraging the respectful use of the park and its historic buildings by the community.

Maplewood Barn was originally part of an estate built by Boone County pioneer, Slater Ensor Lenoir. The Maplewood House still stands on the property that is now Nifong Park. Called “Maplewood” because it was located in a grove of large sugar maple trees, the original farmstead included 427 acres surrounding the house to the east and west. In addition to the family home, buildings on the property included the now separate summer kitchen, which later served as a cottage for family serving staff; a four-bay carriage house with storage and living quarters above; a utility house; a hay barn; and a large barn for animals. That barn eventually became the summer theatre playhouse known as the Maplewood Barn Community Theatre.

Built about 1870 as a working farm building; placed on the National Registry of Historic Places shortly after the Frank G. Nifong Park was dedicated in 1970; burned to the ground in April 2010; rebuilt by Columbia Parks & Recreation and private donors and rededicated in May 2012. The Barn is also about people who began a community theatre that gave its first performance on July 21, 1973. Nowadays they’re called “Barnies” (Scott, 5).

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On a hot mid-Missouri summer's night in 1973, the first performance of the Maplewood Barn Community Theatre began: a 45-minute commedia dell' arte improvisational comedy called *Trial by Haunted House*. At the time, hay bales separated the actors from the audience and lights had yet to be mounted, so every show ended before dark. Stalls inside the Barn that once housed animals, now housed actors as they prepared for opening night. The large double hay loft doors opened to reveal a lover's balcony, a room for plotting dastardly dos in secret, or heaven's clouds. From 1973 to 2010, the Barn changed only slightly—the hay bales were replaced by an actual stage and the dirt floors inside the Barn were replaced by poured concrete. Sweltering heat and bugs made for a challenging environment. It took a special breed of actor and volunteer to brave those conditions simply for the love of the Barn and their craft. Those that participated in Maplewood Barn Community Theatre became known as “Barnies.”

At 8 p.m. on April 5, 2010, tragedy struck—Maplewood Barn burned to the ground. Flames, some reaching 40 to 50 feet high, illuminated the night sky, and were visible throughout much of the city. According to the Columbia Tribune, the fire was one of the largest that Columbia had seen in years (David). The theatre community rallied and a drive to rebuild the Barn ensued. But, as they say, the show must go on and the 2010 Phoenix Season was born from the ashes of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Barn. Using a fleet of donated trailers for dressing rooms, box office, and storage, the Maplewood Barn Community Theatre produced a full season of shows: *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Revenge of the Space Pandas*, *Othello*, and *Camelot*.

According to Michael Scott, then-president of the theatre's board of directors, less than 24 hours after the fire destroyed their historic barn and all of the props, costumes and tools within, Columbia Parks and Recreation informed him they wanted to rebuild (Weil). Over the next two years, a new Barn was raised in Nifong Park—complete with indoor plumbing, restrooms and air conditioning! On May 24, 2012, the lights went up on a new era for Maplewood Barn. Fittingly, old met new for the Barn's first performance of its 40<sup>th</sup> Season with *Fiddler on the Roof*.

The 40<sup>th</sup> season was commemorated with a “Barnie book” written by long-time Barnie, Byron Scott. *BARNIES: Forty Years of Theatre Under the Stars at Maplewood Barn* chronicles the life of the Barn. The book was a labor of love for Scott. He described it as a family photo album. Since the Barn's archives were destroyed in the fire, Barnies both new and old provided photos and stories for the book.

A new era also met new traditions and programs for Maplewood Barn. In 2011, Maplewood Barn Radio Theatre was launched in cooperation with KBIA. Every Friday night at 6:30, people could tune in to KBIA and hear old-time radio shows recorded by Barnies. In 2016, the Maplewood Barn Board of Directors

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got together and recorded an hour-long special Christmas show, *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, in front of a live audience. The KBIA partnership ended in 2019, but Maplewood Barn Radio Theatre is still going strong on Spotify and SoundCloud.

Maplewood Barn Community Theatre is run by a dedicated group of volunteers who serve as a Board of Directors. This board has several committees—each one dedicated to a different aspect of the theatre’s management. The Executive Committee (consisting of the board president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer) oversees the administrative concerns of the theatre and any conflict mediation that may need to take place. The Development and Outreach Committee handles the grant writing, fundraising, and community outreach for the Barn. The Marketing Committee handles all of the advertising and social media management for the Barn. The Production Committee is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the shows, the inner-workings of the Barn including props, director contracts, box office management, and various other things. The Radio Committee is responsible for recruiting directors for the Maplewood Barn Radio Theatre shows and their recording. Finally, the Play Selection Committee discusses options for the season line-ups and presents their ideas to the Board for approval.

Once a season line-up is approved, a call for directors goes out to the community. Potential directors present their vision for the show (including set and costume design)—how they plan to make the show unique—to the Board of Directors. The Board then votes to select those they feel will be the best fit for each show. Dates are set for open auditions for each show. Everyone from Columbia the surrounding communities are welcome to “try out” for shows at the Barn. We’ve had people from as far away as Sedalia commute into Columbia to participate in our shows. Byron Scott once said in an interview with KMOU that “the wonderful, special thing about community theatre is that many people will see one of our shows and they’ll want to be in one.”

Community means so much to those of us at the Maplewood Barn Community Theatre. Since 1973, we have strived to create a sense of family among our volunteers, actors, directors, crew, administrators, sponsors, and our audiences. It takes all of us to make Maplewood Barn thrive—all the “Barnies.” Like any family, we Barnies have had our ups and downs, but we always come back to the Barn.

Mary “Morgan” Dennehy  
President (2019-present)  
Maplewood Barn Community Theatre  
Board of Directors

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