

Vancouver's Metro Theatre still going strong, 500 shows later



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Metro Theatre's production of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* marks the theatre's 500th production. From left to right - character Willoughby played by Kenneth Tynan, Marianne Dashwood played by Cassie Ledoux, Colonel Brandon played by Matthew Spears, Elinor Dashwood played by Lindsay Nelson. *PNG*

Sense and Sensibility

Oct. 29 to Nov. 19 | *Metro Theatre*

Tickets and info: \$24 (adult)/\$21 (senior/student), metrotheatre.com
(<http://metrotheatre.com>)

It's that little theatre on Southwest Marine Drive, the one you might glance out the car window on the way to the airport. Yet somehow, the small, independent company that operates out of that former movie house has survived for over 50 years — long enough to put on its 500th production, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.

"It's a people-pleaser," said Les Erskine, technical director of the play and Metro's general manager.

In the past, Metro has put on other Jane Austen-based work, including *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*.

For this, the 54th season, Erskine said "We put a season together that will appeal to our subscriber base." Some of those, he adds, are long-term subscribers who have been with the company for twenty-some years.

"It's a bit of branding, I guess. All of the Jane Austen stuff has had appeal over the years. And it's good to do something historical, something with a bit of period to it."

Joan Bryans is directing the play, as she has for the company's previous two Austen-based works. Actors, costumes and set are all new. Other productions for the 2016/17 season include the theatre's annual holiday pantomime (with a cast of 27) and, in the new year, the family-friendly play *Crossing Delancey*.

As technical director, Erskine oversees lighting and sound. "I'll do the rigging, I'll bring the set in. I'll be putting up the sign on the marquee."

Erskine became general manager four years ago, when Metro was facing financial difficulties due to a drop in season ticket holders.

"Basically, I put up my hand," he said with a laugh. "Nobody else wanted the job."

It was the second serious dip in the company's finances. The first occurred in 1977, when Metro Theatre lost its government funding.

Until then, Metro — which began in 1962 as the Metropolitan Co-operative Theatre Society — had involved both theatre professionals and amateurs.

Fortunately, when funding ran out, Johnny Duncan — the then-president of Dunbar Musical Society — offered to help steer the company through a new season at virtually no cost to Metro. With the help of volunteers and supporters, the season was a success, and Duncan was elected president. He served for seven years; today, he's still with Metro, working the box office.

"I think it's very rare, very rare indeed" for an amateur theatre to survive this long, said Erskine. "Especially a theatre that owns the space, as well as a scene shop and rehearsal space, and without government grants at this point."

Metro did receive a City of Vancouver cultural grant recently, he said. But in general, success depends on ticket sales. Increasingly, Erskine's been looking to other revenue streams, including more community rentals.

For his part, Erskine credits the little theatre on Southwest Marine Drive for his introduction to theatre, and what became a 40-year-career in the film and television industry. Now, nearly forty years after working on his first stage show at Metro — *Guys and Dolls* in 1968 — he's got back to those roots, and helping expose others to the excitement of live theatre.

"Every show takes a minimum of 2,500 hours of volunteer labour to put on," he said. "At over 500 shows, that means we've put a million-and-a-quarter volunteer hours into our productions. We have people showing up on a Sunday morning to take the sets down and put up the new set. The actors and backstage crew are working hundreds of hours each on a production.

"That's really the big thing. It takes a whole cast and crew and creative team of directors and designers, all of them unpaid."

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Just saw the show - lovely, charming, clever and well cast. Worth every penny of the ticket price. Bravo.

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