

THE IDLE AMERICAN

Little Engines That Can...

Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury

Column #1,072 for Release Week of January 1, 2024, or Later

Compared to the glamour and glitz of Broadway's "Great White Way" in New York City, two Texas venues fall a bit short. Yet, by many standards, they stand equally tall.

I'm referencing Waxahachie, TX, and Brownwood, TX, where the Texas and Lyric Theaters, respectively, have been successfully resurrected. Each has scheduled plays early this year that are "must see" for my wife, Brenda, and me. In a world where headlines scream of violence, starvation, fractured budgets, wars and threats of immigration overrun, we visit community theaters for the same reasons folks attended movies during World War II.

At least we can retreat from reality for a couple of hours....

First up is the Texas Theater offers Amon: The Ultimate Texan, with 8 p.m. productions scheduled January 19-20 and February 23-24. Tickets are now on sale for the grand one-man show that is reflective of the keen insight, meticulous research and humorous persona of Dave Lieber. He is an author and certified public speaker who is best known for his twice-weekly "Watchdog" columns in the Dallas Morning News. The play's first major run was at the Scott Theater in Fort Worth, where most performances were sold out.

It has played in several West Texas cities and has been a smash hit for all 52 performances. The life of the late Amon Carter--longtime publisher of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and owner of Texas' first TV station and Radio Station WBAP--is brilliantly portrayed by Kelvin Dilks. He was formerly a Birdville ISD trustee and is a retired teacher.

It is directed by Connie Sanchez, also a retired teacher. She maintains a sparkling narrative that is caring, accurate and "gollie funny," continually emphasizing Amon's love of his hometown and disdain for Dallas. When "Big D" was chosen for the 1936 Texas Centennial, Amon was furious as he staged a competing extravaganza in Cowtown, hoping that visitors would "choose Dallas for culture and Fort Worth for fun." We've ordered 40 tickets for senior adults at our church, anticipating "sold out" status for all performances. Word has gotten around that this is a "must see" play about a man well known throughout Texas and the Southwest, and perhaps the late Will Rogers' best friend....

Like the Lyric, the Texas opened over a century ago as a vaudeville venue. It was darkened several times by fires and the impact of TV. Its current vitality is largely attributed to Jon and Alyssa Garrett of Waxahachie.

Early in the 2000s, three Brownwood citizens began a campaign to restore the Lyric to its original opulence. Mostly through modest donations, they've raised more than \$4,000,000, an unprecedented Texas response. The 367-seat house is beyond regal, probably more so than when it opened in 1920. Managing Director Eric Evans confirms that more than 30,000 persons attended 2023 productions, with even more expected in 2024.

Brenda and I--along with a small army of senior adults from our church--will be on hand for the matinee performance of All Shook Up on April 13.....

Labeled a "juke box musical" of favorite Elvis Presley hits, the play will be directed by Dr. Nancy Jo Humfeld, veteran educator who served 34 years at Howard Payne University before retiring there in 2020. I hired her in 1986, and naturally believe that she's the best. (Thousands of others likewise agree, thankful that she continues to pour herself into the local theater scene.)

We saw Elvis during a Fort Worth concert in the early 1970s.

Sitting near the stage, Brenda caught a few drops of sweat, and didn't bathe for a week!....

Other theater efforts, such as those in Granbury and Cleburne, are likewise successful, thanks to continued commitment and hard work.

I salute everyone involved in community theater throughout Texas. They are genuine heroes in this "labor of love."

We who attend are beneficiaries of productions that are often comparable to Broadway, and at prices little more than the tax on Big Apple tickets....

Dr. Newbury, longtime university president, writes weekly and speaks throughout Texas. Contact: 817-447-3872. Email: newbury@speakerdoc.com.