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One year as the Palace Theatre’s executive director and Susan Rosko Fogarty is on the move

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Susan Fogarty in front of the Palace’s marquee on Clinton Avenue in Albany. Michael Hallisey / TheSpot518

#SusanRoskoFogarty #PalaceTheatre #OneYear #MichaelHallisey #SpotlightNews

ALBANY — It’s not uncommon for Susan Rosko Fogarty to log 16,000 steps on her FitBit.

“I have the same challenges that everyone working here has, which is doing something for yourself,” said Fogarty, executive director of the Palace Theatre. “Trying to exercise. Trying to run. Trying to do yoga. Very rarely do I get to do those things.”

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Despite that admission, she’s still a person very much on the move.

Fogarty is now one year into her role leading a Palace Theatre that is more entrenched in its surrounding community in its history. The near-century-old theatre is embarking on an ambitious renovation project that will serve to bridge a revitalized downtown with its burgeoning warehouse district. With its glistening marquee lighting the city’s only true archway, it is the crown jewel set atop a storied Clinton Square neighborhood long tarnished by neglect. The weight of her role’s responsibility, both the venue and the community, wasn’t lost on her when she accepted the job, she said. She embraced it.

“I was extraordinarily lucky to have the best team in show business,” said Fogarty. “The greatest gift was walking in that first day and just knowing that these folks care deeply about the Palace, care deeply about the customer, and I knew everything would just fall into place.”

Holly Brown leaves



Holly Brown, Executive Director of the Palace Performing Arts Center, announced last October that she would be moving on from her position as Executive Director of the Palace Performing Arts Center by Halloween.

Under Brown’s leadership, the Palace Performing Arts Center had become one of the top-ranking theatres in the region. The number of event nights doubled over five seasons, and attendance grew by 40 percent.

Brown expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to “run this beautiful and beloved theatre” as she announced her then-pending departure. Increasing event nights meant more patrons. More patrons meant more business funneling into the satellite restaurants and tasting rooms circulating around the old RKO movie palace. The focus wasn’t just on quantity.

“There is a saying in this industry that you are only as good as ‘what walks on the stage,’” said Brown. “My goal has been to not only increase the number of event nights at the theatre, but to bring in some of the biggest names in the business.”

Shortly before Brown left, The Palace earned the distinction of being named the third highest-grossing theatre of its size in the Mid-Atlantic Region, and the fourth highest-grossing historic theatre in the country. The organization operated to a surplus in each year of Brown’s leadership.

“Under Holly’s direction, the Palace Performing Arts Center is known for its diverse, outstanding, and high caliber programming which has translated into financial success,” stated Alan Goldberg, Chairman of the Palace Performing Arts Center Board of Directors.

Months later, Brown’s name would appear again in a familiar venue. The Cohoes Music Hall would announce Brown as its newly appointed executive director. The two storied halls had partnered with one another, with the Palace aiding the smaller stage with marketing and scheduling shows.

Challenge

The Palace was losing its executive director at a crucial moment.

An ambitious \$65 million renovation and expansion plan was pitched to area investors the previous July.

It meant more than a coat of paint. It involved expanding the stage and the lobby, introducing more technology and installing an additional 600-seat theatre. It was a plea to elevate the arts within a burgeoning community teeming with real estate investors focused on pulling Clinton Square out of squalor.

The plan hinged on the city selling its ownership of the theatre to The Palace Performing Arts Center, Inc. to qualify for grants. Once finished, the Palace would “bridge together” downtown Albany with the growing development of the city’s Warehouse District. Eight months later, the city council agreed to sell the theatre for \$750,000, with payments spread over the next 30 years.

Goldberg described it as a “pivotal moment,” and the board wasted no time in finding Brown’s replacement. In the same statement announcing Brown’s departure, Goldberg named Fogarty as executive director. The decision was scrutinized by unnamed sources who claimed it was done in secret. There was also the concern of Fogarty’s apparent lack of experience. This would be the first time running a venue.

“As we embark on the most transformational arts and culture redevelopment venture in Albany, we are confident Susan will successfully engage and inspire the public and private sectors of this community in supportive partnership as we



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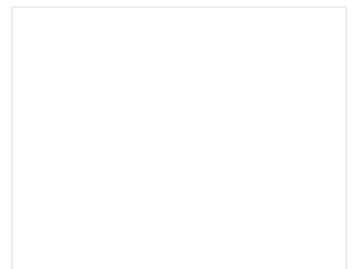
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continue the launch of our campaign to renovate and restore this iconic theatre,” stated Goldberg. “This project while marking a critical juncture for the growth of the Palace Performing Arts Center, will also provide an economic boost to the Capital Region.”

Fogarty was plucked from the financial world. She climbed the executive ranks through Bank of America, HSBC and Key Bank, where she was senior vice president. However, the Clifton Park native’s resume detailed a more diverse candidate. Prior to her path through the banking world, she spent more than 15 years in the recording and entertainment industry. She was part of launching Richard Branson’s V2 Records in America. There, she managed sales, advertising and marketing budgets for V2 Records for several territories. As Director of National Sales for Sony/BMG, she worked with highly visible music artists. While studying at Syracuse University, she pursued a degree in public policy. In all, her experience boiled down to her ability to manage people, massage relationships and sell a brand.

“Those two industries really gave me the background to come into a venue operation,” said Fogarty.

Moby Dick

The Palace already acts as an anchor to which more than \$280 million is dogeared towards various real estate proposals within Clinton Square. As the majority of motorists access downtown by means of 787, the Clinton Avenue exit leads visitors to a long-neglected threshold into New York’s Capital. Compounding that image is how the exit is the city’s lone access outside an ill-conceived exit for Route 20, and another that leads directly into an Empire State Plaza built with the intent to draw attention away from a once drab cityscape.

In the past several years, real estate investors have turned to Clinton Square and the city’s neighboring Warehouse District. Decaying tenant houses dating back to when Herman Melville penned “Moby Dick” and abandoned breweries that once defined Albany’s prideful past in beer crafting grew more attractive as housing trends pointed back downtown. Up cropped The Gateway and Monroe apartments, and The Lofts at 733 Broadway. Places to entertain and dine these new residents emerged through McGeary’s, Olde English Pub and The Hollow. But, that’s only half the story. Where one half is addressing business from neighboring residents, there’s the need to lure visitors — tourists — from outside the neighborhood. There lies The Palace.



The Palace

The Palace Performing Arts Center plays an important role in the Capital District’s cultural, educational and economic landscape. Its free Summer in the City film series provides a positive, affordable experience to more than 8,000 children and their families. Its impact also includes an arts education program and providing a home for countless dance recitals and graduations. Not to mention, it is the home to both the Grammy-Award winning Albany Symphony Orchestra and Park Playhouse.



“Albany is going through a lot right now,” said Fogarty, pointing in particular to the Arbor Hill neighborhood. While meeting with the surrounding neighborhood, community leaders shared with Fogarty that the Palace “felt really far away.” To remedy the disconnect, Fogarty said the Palace attends monthly meetings with the Arbor Hill Neighborhood Association. “One of the more valuable things we’ve been able to do is connect our community leaders with business leaders.”

Fogarty lists her successes under her first year as executive director by the relationships she’s building outside the “four walls”

of the Palace, and by the continued development of her management team.

“I have three priorities every day,” said Fogarty. The priorities, she said, were shared with her staff on her first day and it remains true today. They include, “the staff; programming this beautiful, historic venue; and the restoration/renovation project. ... Those are my three priorities every day.”

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