

THAT'S SHOW BIZ

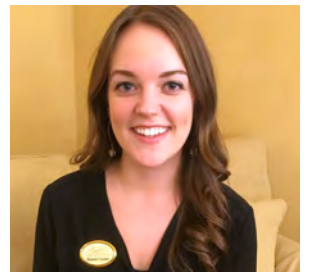
A BACKSTAGE LOOK AT
LOCAL PERFORMANCE VENUES.
STORY BY RICA LEWIS

Whether you're a fan of opera, magic shows, comedy, Broadway musicals or American rock bands like the Beach Boys — there's a seat just for you in The Villages. But before you settle in for a show, let's take a peek behind the curtain at your favorite performance venues — The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center and The Studio Theatre at Tierra Del Sol.



THE STUDIO THEATRE AT TIERRA DEL SOL

Change can be good. The Studio Theatre at Tierra Del Sol is a testament. What was once primarily a country club with golf course views and savory fare has transitioned to a hub for modern theater. At The Studio, patrons enjoy performances that spur conversation, examine cultural issues and unabashedly strive for unity. For those unfamiliar with the venue, booking coordinator Elizabeth Constant gives us a tour of the space.



ELIZABETH
CONSTANT

Although patrons are welcome to dine before or after a show, The Studio is not a dinner theater. A streamlined space with dark flooring and walls, the black box has an avant-garde vibe with seating for 120. The no-color, no-frills structure puts the show and its cast at the forefront, allowing the audience to connect. The limited space, however, restricts the types of shows the theater can host. "You won't see Shakespeare's 'Much Ado About Nothing' with 17 characters at this venue," Elizabeth said. What you will see are innovative performances and edgy storytelling in a room that morphs with each show.



“In theater terms, a black box is a flex space, meaning it changes,” Elizabeth said. Designer Kenneth Constant creates the varied arrangements, which give shows a fresh feel.

“The experience is different for each audience member — for the people sitting here, and there, and over there,” Elizabeth said, gesturing around the room.

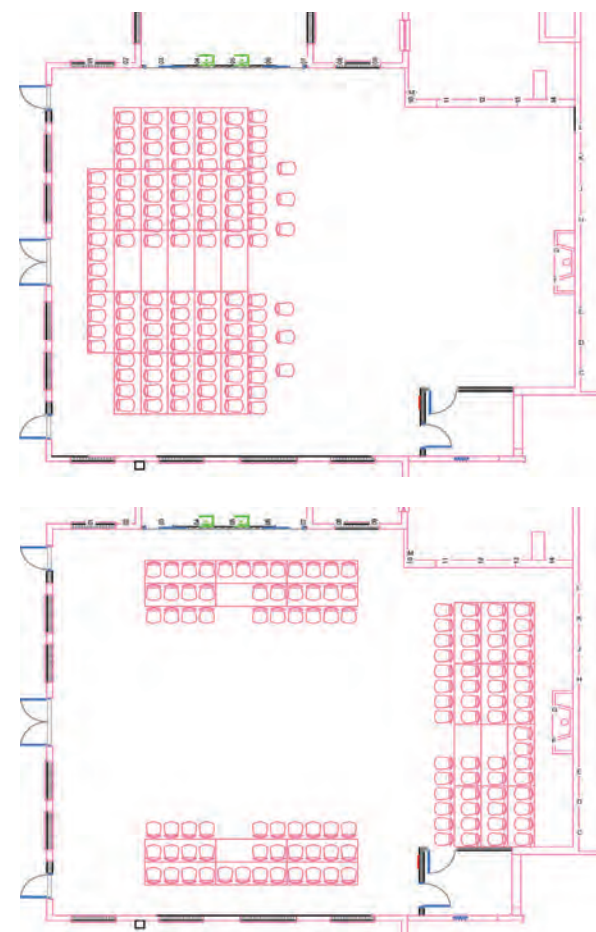
She talks about the formations in detail. “A thrust design has chairs on three sides with the stage thrusting into the audience,” she said.

Other seating formations include in the round, with a central performance area, and proscenium with seating that frames the action.

“Were lucky to have this kind of flexibility,” Kenneth said.

Because the movement and action of each show lends itself to certain orientations, directors often decide the seating arrangements. The plans are made well in advance — as far as 10 to 12 months ahead, Kenneth notes.

“We have a resident director on staff who directs two out of four of the performances, but we also host outside directors as well, and that’s kind of unique,” Elizabeth said.



SELECTING THE SCRIPTS

“Relevance,” Elizabeth said is priority when it comes to choosing the scripts at The Studio Theatre. Throughout the summer and into January, staff weighs the options for the upcoming season. “We also look to push the envelope,” she said.

Recently, Elizabeth hosted “Scripts from Scratch,” the first-ever play festival. “Statewide, we asked all playwrights to submit scripts that had never been produced.” After selection, audiences came to hear the final drafts, the world premiere of each new play. Minus costumes and scenery, playwrights presented their scripts in a staged reading format. “Four plays over two days,” Elizabeth said. “It went well so we hope to bring that back in 2021. There’s a lot of prep work; we got 50 submissions and I think we’ll just continue to get more.”

Other criteria in the selection process: a small cast. “Fewer than 14 people, and we don’t want shows that have been produced locally recently. So if Mad Cow theater or Hippodrome in Gainesville did the show, we wouldn’t want to conflict with that. But again, the main thing is relevance — whether it’s a discussion about family, race, suicide, or what’s happening in society. Also, we’re looking for a unit set, not a ton of changing sceneries. We leave that up to the audience’s imagination because we don’t have wing space or fly space like at The Sharon where we can host Broadway. So we keep it simple and Kenny designs within those parameters.”

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

“It’s not everyone’s cup of tea,” Elizabeth said of The Studio and its performances. “That’s to be expected because we deal with hot button issues. But the folks who do enjoy it thank us for bringing home the big-city controversial topics. This is especially true among our native Chicago residents and people from New York who are used to seeing more edgy, versatile theater. It took a minute, but we found our patrons. That’s what I love about our venues — Savannah, The Sharon and Studio; they all have different audiences, but it’s nice that we can cater to them all.”

THE *Studio*
THEATRE
TIERRA DEL SOL™

Location:

Tierra Del Sol,
806 San Marino Drive

Tickets and Information:

751-7799 or
www.TheSharonStudio.com





THE SHARON L. MORSE PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Production house versus roadhouse — this is the primary difference between the quaint Studio Theatre and The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center, named for the matriarch of the Morse family. “We seat 1,022 people,” Elizabeth said. What was once a staff of four has grown to more than 30 creative key members. “The staff growth has been wonderful,” she said. “These theater professionals truly make an amazing Performing Arts Center run. We tour approximately 125 performances per year, but some shows are popular so they run for four shows, and that means we’re hosting 80 to 90 productions.”

There’s much to love about the venue, with its high-beamed ceilings, arched doorways, rich tapestries and polished wood fixtures and accents. But The Sharon is not just a regal space — state-of-the-art audio, visual and theatrical rigging systems create an ambience for exceptional entertainment. From rock icons to comedy geniuses, operatic performers and cutting-edge magicians of illusion, the venue hosts it all. See *Oliver Twist* or *Ballroom with a Twist*. See a cabaret-style show or a contemporary Chinese circus act — each season brings a range of artistic disciplines.

“My favorite aspect is the pit — the first two rows in the auditorium,” Elizabeth said. At house level, the pit adds 26 more seats to the room. When raised to stage height, it creates a deeper stage for performances. “We can lower it too — about 10 feet to host the orchestra for plays or musicals.”

Aiding the acoustics are specially made curtains that keep sound from bouncing off the walls. “For a rock show or musicals, we want the curtains to absorb the sound so we don’t get echoes in the room,” Kenny explained. “But all the walls are curved, built for orchestral pieces. For an orchestra, we pull away the curtains to get that bounce and echo — a maestro would call the sound ‘wet.’”

Patrons and performers appreciate the intricacies supporting the sound. “A lot of the touring orchestras really like our space,” Elizabeth said.

Outside of the auditorium, the lobby is a cabaret hot spot, seating 140 people for “Don’t Tell Nonnie” performers. “It’s an elevated open-mic event,” Elizabeth said. “We bring in all our furniture; The audience brings their sheet music and it’s a blast.”



BACKSTAGE FEATURES

Ropes and pulleys are a thing of the past — enter the electronic fly system. “Typically, in theaters when you see things move up and down — backdrops, scenery, anything like that, it works on a counterweight system with ropes and pulleys,” Kenneth said. “But ours is all electronic — we’re one of the first theaters to have that.”

With 32 lines that can shoulder 1,200 pounds, the system is highly technical.

“Kenny can log in and queue an entire show,” Elizabeth said.

“It’s very rare to have an entire fly system run this way — pretty much unheard of,” Kenneth added. “It allows us to do a lot of cool stuff.”



Kenneth Constant

SNAG YOUR SEAT!

The Sharon and The Studio, Broadway or Black Box — pick your pleasure. Both venues offer distinct features that spotlight great performances, captivate Central Florida audiences and foster creative expression on and off the stage. “We sometimes book shows 24-18 months down the road, and when the show finally gets here, it’s rewarding to see everyone enjoy it,” Elizabeth said.

THE *Sharon*
PERFORMING ARTS
CENTER®

Location:
Spanish Springs
Town Square
1051 Main St.

Tickets and Information:
751-7799 or
www.TheSharon.com