



Center stage

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In 1922, a plaque was designed for a soon-to-be-opened amphitheater within Houston's graceful Hermann Park and dedicated the outdoor venue: "To the Arts of Music, Poetry, Drama and Oratory, by which the striving spirit of man seeks to interpret the words of god."

Nearly 90 years later, the same inscription might have to read "spirit of man or woman," and perhaps "the words of god, or whatever." Yet, even in its second theater built on this site, since 1968 a lovely proscenium stage with a steel canopy that locals call "the bat wings," Miller Outdoor Theatre hasn't adjusted its mission much. Only who's onstage and who's in the audience have changed mightily.

"The purpose is to present the very best possible arts—all kinds of arts, diverse and extraordinary—to the largest possible audience ... and always free of charge," says Cissy Segall Davis, a veteran of local theater for decades and now managing director of Miller Outdoor Theatre. "This board and the city are dedicated to making sure that everything held here is free and available to everyone, no matter their circumstances. This big tent is available to all."

Summer is definitely a special time for the theater, complete with numerous performances by the city's biggest guns: Houston Symphony, Houston Grand Opera, Houston Ballet, and the wonderful Houston Shakespeare Festival. Yet the traditional summer season has expanded recently to last from sometime in March to sometime in November, which makes the run slightly longer than summer drags on, even here in Houston.

In addition, appearances by such high-profile groups only set the stage for an even greater wealth of smaller-scale theater and dance events, along with performance troupes brought in from all around the world. This is a far cry from the beginnings of Miller Outdoor, when the emphasis was on "culture" with a capital C, nearly all of it imported from Europe. And it is especially different from the first Miller performance ever.

"It was a civic pageant," says Davis, stressing with a grin that she wasn't around. "There were like 2,500 people in the show and, for many years, those were the types of performances that took place here."

Houstonians who fill Miller Outdoor's 1,500-plus seats under the canopy or bring their picnic to the breeze-kissed hill behind it are likely to find much to love in this year's schedule. And at least some of that is thanks to the child born in Bluefield, W.Va., who came south to the University of Texas in Austin before embarking on an entertainment career. Davis initially worked her magic for the Houston outfit called Pace, back in its motorcross and tractor-pull days before it turned to theater and concerts. And for 20 years off and on, she was a major force behind Theatre Under The Stars, which actually began at Miller in 1968 with a production of the musical *Bells Are Ringing*.

"Today," Davis says, "when I walk out and see the diversity of our audiences all coming here to enjoy, it warms my heart. You can take a vacation right here, go to different countries and experience every kind of art, all in the same week. Why not? It's free. That's the best price in town."