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STAGE & DANCE

Kentucky theater world mourns 'Jesus Christ Superstar' director who nurtured artists

BY RICH COPLEY CONTRIBUTING ARTS WRITER

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Director Mike Thomas during a rehearsal for "Jesus Christ Superstar" at the Arboretum in Lexington, KY, Wednesday, June 23, 2004. This was their first rehearsal on the outdoor stage. Charles Bertram/Staff
CHARLES BERTRAM 2004 staff file photo



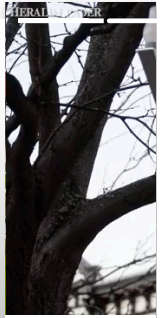
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Many people in the Kentucky theater community spent the last few days of 2022 mourning the death of Mike Thomas, a tireless theater artist who touched communities from his native Maysville to Bowling Green and many stops in between.

“Mike was a person who worked very, very hard to make theatre happen in his community — wherever that community happened to be at the time,” Lexington-based theater artist Bo List wrote in a Facebook tribute. “The work of making plays is difficult, and it can take every scrap of energy out of you. Mike’s energy seemed limitless. Times like these remind us that those lights that burn brightly and seemingly forever will one day dim, and we should not take their illumination for granted.”

Thomas died Dec. 29 following a short illness, according to [an obituary from Knox Brothers Funeral Home in Maysville](#). He was 67. Services were held Jan. 5 at the Washington Opera House in Maysville, where he was managing director until his retirement in 2020. That final stop brought full circle a theater career that included an extended stop in Lexington, where he was artistic director of Lexington Musical Theatre and helmed numerous storied productions, and work in Frankfort directing the innovative Museum Theatre for the Kentucky Historical Society.

TOP VIDEOS

“I don’t think you can ever take away the scale of what he accomplished,” said Greg Hardison, Creative Engagement Specialist at the Kentucky Historical Society, who was hired by Thomas and took over directing the society’s theater program when Thomas left in 2005. “One of those pivotal moments that I think he would hang his hat on is ‘Jesus Christ Superstar,’ and the absolute massive audiences that turned out for that show. ... The relationships that he developed within every production that he did, those people continued to want to work with Mike, continued to want to have his feedback and contribute.”

The “Jesus Christ Superstar” Hardison mention was a 2004 production for the Lexington Shakespeare Festival that attracted thousands of patrons to the University of Kentucky Arboretum over a multi-night run. The show was the festival’s first musical in a long time, and in Lexington, Thomas was the logical person to helm it along with his longtime artistic and life partner, Mark Funk, music director of most of Thomas’ productions.

Fellow theater artist Marty Wayman said that in the 1980s and ’90s Thomas was one of a handful of people who were the face of theater in Lexington, directing and performing in shows for groups such as Actors Guild of Lexington and serving as director of Lexington Musical Theatre, neither of which still exist. Facebook was filled with tributes from Lexington area performers sharing fond memories of Thomas, but he also spent years working in other communities such as Bowling Green, where he graduated from Western Kentucky University and later returned to direct the Public Theatre of Kentucky for four seasons in the 1990s and later as the administrative managing director of the Capitol Arts Center from 2005 to 2007, according to his obituary.

But roads kept leading back to Maysville, where he first fell in love with theater in shows by the Maysville Players. In 2007, he returned to the Northern Kentucky town to become producing director of the Players and managing director of the Washington Opera House. It was during that time that he and Funk married.

Thomas was active in causes outside of the theater, including working with Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS and two terms as chairman of the Maysville Commission on Human Rights.

“I think that’s the thing that is the hardest for all of us who love him, is knowing the absolute talent and just love he had for people, and people that don’t fit in sometimes elsewhere,” Hardison said.

Mike Fryman as Jesus talks with director Mike Thomas during a rehearsal for “Jesus Christ Superstar” at the Arboretum in Lexington, KY, Wednesday, June 23, 2004. This was their first rehearsal on the outdoor stage. Charles Bertram/Staff Charles Bertram 2004 staff file photo

As much as audiences enjoyed Thomas’ productions, actors valued him as a mentor and confidant, particularly young, aspiring performers. Cacey Clarke Nardolillo said Thomas was already a legend in Maysville when she was growing up there. Though he had moved away during her childhood, he frequently returned to lead various projects, which is how she first got to know him when he coached some of the leads in a production of “The Wizard of Oz.” They went on to work together on other shows including a production of “The Fantasticks” at the Opera House that “changed my life,” said Nardolillo, who has gone on to an active career in the arts (see item below.)

“Mike really inspired in me a deep love of musical theater,” Nardolillo said on the day of Thomas’ funeral. “All day I’ve been humming ‘I Believe in You’ from ‘How to Succeed in Business.’ He sang it once on a review we sang on together in Maysville at the Opera House, and he really instilled that belief in the young people he directed and taught. He lifted us up, gave us wings, and taught us to fly. I will miss him dearly.”

CHAMBER FESTIVAL AND ORCHESTRA NAME NEW DIRECTOR

Late last year, the [Chamber Music Festival of Lexington](#) named Cacey Clarke Nardolillo executive director of the festival and the Lexington Chamber Orchestra, which the festival operates. A Maysville native, Lexington audiences first saw Nardolillo as a voice student at the University of Kentucky and she has performed across the United States and Europe. She holds degrees from the University of Colorado and University of Kentucky and is director of the Kentucky District of the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition, chorus master for University of Kentucky

Opera Theatre, on the music faculty at Centre College, maintains a private studio in Lexington, and has served as Director of Opera for Prague Summer Nights Young Artists Music Festival in the Czech Republic.

Cacey Clarke Nardolillo *Provided*

The Chamber Music Festival of Lexington was launched in 2007, led by artistic director Nathan Cole, a Lexington native who is now first associate concertmaster of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Late every summer since, except for 2020, the festival has brought Cole, a core group of professional musicians from around the country and guest artists to Lexington for a week or more of concerts.

In 2019, Nardolillo said, the Festival took over management of the Lexington Chamber Orchestra. The community ensemble had its last performance in February 2020. Its founding music director Jan Pellant departed Lexington since then, Nardolillo said. She said the Orchestra hopes to announce a May concert and who will be wielding the baton for that performance soon.

Nardolillo cheered the dual missions of bringing in top-flight national performers with the festival and presenting great local talent with the orchestra: "It's a win-win for our community, and I'm happy to help facilitate that."

TAKE 'THE LAST TRAIN TO NIBROC'

Studio Players' next production is an internationally acclaimed work of local interest. Arlene Hutton's "Last Train to Nibroc" is set during World War II and is loosely inspired by her parents who had Eastern Kentucky roots – note, Nibroc is Corbin spelled backwards and Corbin hosts the annual Nibroc Festival. The story focuses on Raleigh and May, a couple who meet on a train. Hutton followed the couple through two more plays: "See Rock City" and "Gulf View Drive," known collectively as the Nibroc Trilogy.

You can see Studio's "Last Train to Nibroc," directed by Steve Meadows, Jan. 12 to 29, with performances at 8 p.m. Jan. 12 and Fridays and Saturdays, and 2:30 p.m. Sundays at the Carriage House Theatre, 154 W. Bell Court. Visit studioplayers.org or call 859-257-4929 for tickets.

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