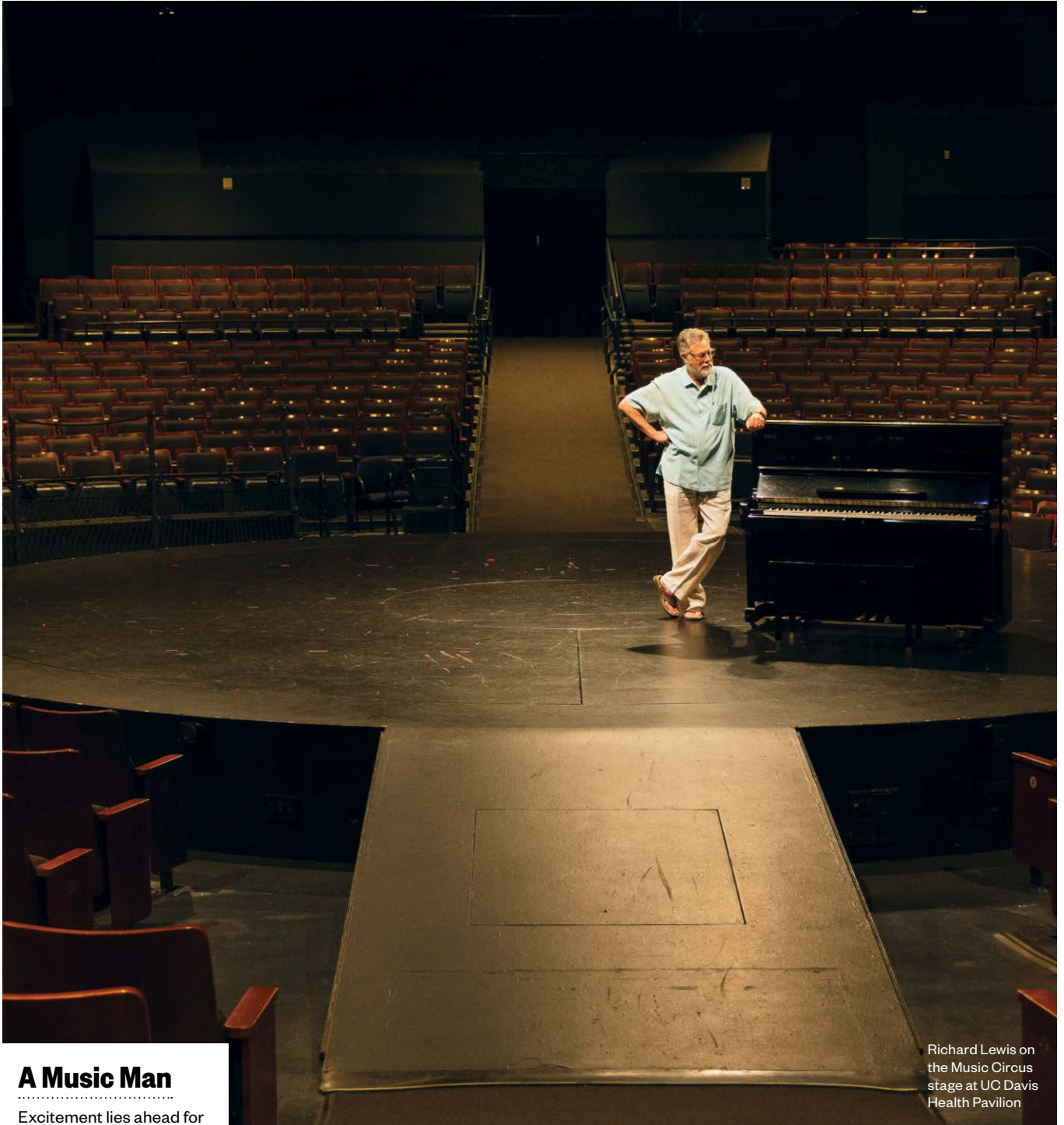


Bravo

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INSIDE: *The Music Circus season starts with "Kinky Boots"*



Richard Lewis on the Music Circus stage at UC Davis Health Pavilion

A Music Man

Excitement lies ahead for Music Circus, according to Richard Lewis, president and CEO of Broadway Sacramento.

📷 RYAN ANGEL MEZA

BY CATHY CASSINOS-CARR

It was the worst of times and now it's the best of times: Broadway at Music Circus is back.

After nearly three years of COVID-enforced closure (the last show was "In the Heights" in August 2019), the beloved theater-in-the-round, a bona fide Sacramento institution, will bring back the razzle dazzle on June 14 with "Kinky Boots," the first show of the 2022 season.

The return of Music Circus is a victory not just for the Sacramento arts community and local theatergoers but for Broadway Sacramento's never-say-die president and CEO, Richard Lewis. Lewis has been with Music Circus nearly since its inception—or, more to the point, his own inception. When he made his onstage debut in 1952 he was, in fact, a fetus: His mother, actress/singer Evelyn Bell, was pregnant with Lewis when performing that summer on the stage of the original tent. Richard's father, Russell Lewis, had launched Music Circus the previous year with producing partner Howard Young. It was the first professional musical theater-in-the-round west of the Mississippi, and an overnight success.

Much has happened in the 71 years since Music Circus opened. But it's fair to say the last two years have been like no other—and no one has been in the middle of it quite like Lewis. In this recent interview conducted via Zoom, Lewis ponders the company's past, present and future.



First things first: Congratulations on keeping Broadway Sacramento alive, pandemic be damned. (Broadway Sacramento includes Music Circus and Broadway on Tour.) Was there ever a serious threat of permanent closure?

It was very, very dicey. We got through "A Bronx Tale" in March 2020—that was a Broadway on Tour—and then everything shut down. They said it was only going to be for two weeks. Well, it didn't quite work out that way, did it?

So we started looking at what's it going to take to survive? One of the first things that happened was that the audience was incredibly understanding. Music Circus for the summer of 2020 had already been on sale to subscribers, and most of them pretty much stuck with it. There were some requests for refunds, but basically, they stuck with it. And the donor base also stuck with us. They recognized us as an institution—something worth preserving here in Sacramento. And they did what

they could to help. We do rely heavily on contributions. But much, much more heavily we rely on selling tickets. Well, we couldn't sell tickets to anything. And when that kind of revenue stream dries up, good luck.

So we did what we could do. There were pay cuts, there were layoffs, there were several furloughs, and we were hanging in. I tried the work-from-home thing, but I'm too old. I do what I do. I get up in the morning, I get my act together, I go downtown and I go to the office. So I spent basically 18 months alone here at the office because I had to keep things moving forward. We had to prepare for the eventual reopening. But there was no money coming in.

The first great piece of news was the CARES Act. And Mayor [Darrell] Steinberg, who is a hero to me to this day, dedicated a significant amount of money to help the creative community, and we received an appropriate portion of what he had to offer. That gave us a little bit of

breathing room. And then the federal government stepped up, and there was PPP1 and PPP2 [Paycheck Protection Program] and a Shuttered Venue Operators Grant, which was an enormous blessing to this company. Between that and staffers working at home, we were able to pivot and function as a company and get ready to do what we ultimately did do, which was to return with "Hamilton" last fall. At the same time, we had to pay attention to the massive transformation of the Community Center Theater. And, fortunately, at the end of the day, what we've got over there at the SAFE Credit Union Performing Arts Center is just a gorgeous theater—exactly the kind of asset the community needs to see.

The story had a happy ending. But what a nightmare.

It was a stunning thing to have happen—a real shocker. I've been here for decades, and it was:

How is this possible? How the heck did we get put down by a bug? But we held it together, worked together. Problems came up, problems got solved.

Money was a big one. Money got fixed. And here we go! Everybody's very excited to get back to the [UC Davis Health] Pavilion, which has sat dark for two years.

Let's talk about the shows on tap for this summer. How does it feel to be back in the groove?

Some of the shows are actually from 2020, and some titles since that time became unavailable to us. So we had to make a couple of changes, but it's

still a terrific lineup. What's also terrific is that people are going back to work in our community—this started with "Hamilton"—from stage-hands to wardrobe. And now, local musicians. You want to talk about people excited to get back to work and do what they do for a living? To actually have a living restored to you? I'm looking

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6.22 EVENTS

forward to seeing them back in that [orchestra] pit. And it's so great to walk up and down the hall and see people in the office and know we've managed to preserve their ability to pay their bills, feed their families and have a roof over their heads.

Can you give us a quick rundown of this season's lineup?

On June 14 we'll open with "Kinky Boots." It was several years ago on tour, and it was kind of a surprise hit. It's a good show, but that doesn't mean people will buy tickets to it. Well, they bought tickets.

What's always exciting is to see a show like "Kinky Boots" on Broadway, and then go into the Pavilion and see it in the round. It's such a unique experience. What will end up happening is that it won't be as much about production values or scenery; it becomes about the play itself. We have discovered time and time again that when you take a work and put it into the round, the intimacy of the venue really lends itself to make for a better work of art on the stage.

say. "Kiss Me, Kate" we're very excited about doing. Haven't done that in a while. It's Cole Porter, it's an older show and still a good, solid piece of work. "Something Rotten!" is just hilarious. It's great fun, and very original. I'm looking forward to that in particular. "The Secret Garden," again, a beautiful show and terrific opportunities for a couple of young people, in particular. It's something that's kind of timely, all things considered.

And then you get to the final show of the season, "The Color Purple." When I saw it on Broadway, it was gut wrenching. I was in tears by the intermission. But then you get to the end and it's so affirming—such an uplifting, positive finish. So again, it's a diverse season and it's going to be a big one.

It's a lot of work. But it's very fulfilling and great fun, especially when you're doing it in the round and you can really see the audience reaction. And Sacramento audiences are so outstanding! When you do it right, they let you know. And we do it right. Scott Klier [producing artistic director and COO] sets a very, very high bar. And that means the production staff, the cast, musicians—everybody. We've got to step up, because this is where Broadway comes for the summer. Everybody'd better pick it up, 'cause here we go!

If I've done my math correctly, you'll turn 70 later this year. Are you considering taking your last bow and retiring?

This is a nonprofit, and part of my motivation to do this is that it really represents the legacy of my father. That's a big motivator for me. It also means you need a clear path—you need leadership that will continue. So yes, I've done a succession plan. And yeah, I'll be 70. But I'm not dead yet.

*For more information about Broadway at Music Circus, including updates on COVID-19 protocols, visit broadwaysacramento.com or call (916) 557-1999. **IS***

The rest of the lineup is a mix of older and newer shows—kind of a classic Music Circus formula.

Yes. "Carousel" I've certainly seen in the round before. It's a beautiful show. I mean, it's Rodgers & Hammerstein, it's a gorgeous show, and it's got something to say. Actually, all the shows have something to



Lewis as a young boy in 1952 "flying" with the harness used by the star of "Peter Pan"



Sewing the Music Circus tent, circa 1952

BROADWAY AT MUSIC CIRCUS: 2022 SEASON

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| "Kinky Boots" June 14–19 | "Kiss Me, Kate" July 12–17 | "The Secret Garden" Aug. 9–14 |
| "Rodgers & Hammerstein's Carousel" June 28–July 3 | "Something Rotten!" July 26–31 | "The Color Purple" Aug. 23–28 |



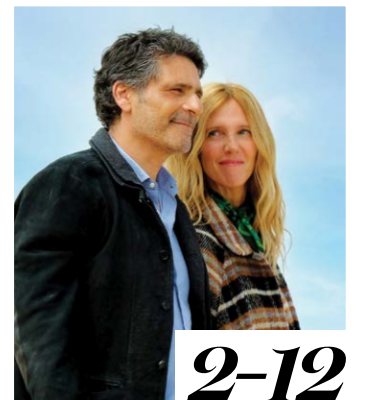
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2-12

JUNE 2-12

Vive le Cinéma!—Celebrating its 21st year, the **Sacramento French Film Festival** takes place at three downtown theaters—Tower, Esquire IMAX and Crest—for four nights of French cinema and culture (June 2, 5, 11 and 12), along with virtual film screenings, now offered on a streaming platform year-round. Forgot your French? Pas de problème: All films feature English subtitles. sacramentofrenchfilmfestival.org

JUNE 3-11

Bard Under the Stars—For a free night of theater outdoors, take in Take Note Troupe's 19th Annual Shakespeare in the Park production of The Bard's madcap romantic comedy **"Twelfth Night."** Performed by youths and young adults, shows by the Rocklin-based theater group are staged at Auburn School Park Preserve, Folsom Historic District Amphitheatre and Quarry Park in Rocklin. takenote troupe.org

JUNE 16-OCT. 15

Go van Gogh—Step into an illuminated universe of Vincent van Gogh's starry nights, sunflowers and more at **Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience**. Attracting millions of visitors in cities throughout the world, this traveling 360-degree, light-and-sound-infused art experience mesmerizes all ages with its massive, two-story digital projections of the Dutch postimpressionist's iconic works. vangoghexpo.com/sacramento

JUNE 17

Top of His Game—Country music megastar **Chris Stapleton** is having a banner year, racking up six Country Music Association awards, winning (for the third time) Academy of Country Music's 2022 Male Artist of the Year and pocketing three Grammys (for eight total) this spring. A Kentucky native with bluegrass roots and a soulful Southern-rock sound, Stapleton brings his All-American Road Show tour to Toyota Amphitheatre in Wheatland. concerts.livenation.com

JUNE 26

Curtis Fest—Nothing says summer like a festive community gathering in a big, shady park, and Curtis Park boasts one of the best. Enjoy the **Curtis Fest Artisan Fair**—booth after booth of hand-crafted wares, plus food and entertainment—followed by the first of three Music in the Park summer concerts, with children's entertainer Mr. Cooper and the band Unsupervised. sierra2.org

Note: All events are subject to change, based on local and state health and safety regulations. Before you set out, confirm the event's dates and details, and be ready to comply with any COVID-related measures (mask, proof of vaccine/booster, negative test) required to attend.