



From humble beginnings to bright future: How the St. Augustine Amphitheatre raised its profile

By Colleen Jones
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When the St. Augustine Amphitheatre first opened in 1965, it played one show — just one — over and over and over, for the next 32 years.

Of course, it was not just any show. Renowned playwright Paul Green was commissioned to create a dramatic rendition of how St. Augustine was founded on the occasion of the city's 400th anniversary and it became part of a historic pilgrimage of sorts for visitors.

A much smaller facility at the time, the Amphitheatre, carved out of 16 acres off Route A1A South, sat only 2,000 people.

"A lot of people remember coming here as a kid and seeing it," said Ryan Murphy, director of the St. Johns County Cultural Events Division and Amphitheatre general manager.

In 1973, "Cross and Sword" was designated as "Florida's Official State Play" by the state Legislature. The play ran until 1997, with budget constraints and the public's changing appetite for entertainment contributing to its demise.

The outdoor concert space, now revamped and modernized, attracts A-list acts like Steve Miller, Jack Johnson, Kid Rock, Little Richard and Willie Nelson. It was recently ranked No. 4 of the Top 50 Amphitheaters in the world by Pollster, based on ticket sales.

Murphy said the ranking was even more significant because the Amphitheatre was compared much larger venues. With a maximum capacity of just 4,100, Murphy said, "We have to do three to four shows to compete with their one [in ticket sales]."

Murphy, who has been with the Amphitheatre for the last nine years, gave the large-scale renovation of the performance space much of the credit for the success it is enjoying.

In 2002, St. Johns County acquired the property and began managing the Amphitheatre. The first order of business was resurrecting the community asset.

While the venue had served as the host to annual Shakespeare festivals from 1997 to 2003, it remained largely vacant and time and the elements had taken their toll.

“It was in pretty bad shape at that time; it hadn’t been maintained,” said Tommy Bledsoe, who formerly had Murphy’s position, coming into the organization in 2002. “The building was in bad shape and the concession stand and bathrooms were just rudimentary.”

Five years of construction and a \$9 million investment later (the original structure was demolished and a new one built in its place), the St. Augustine Amphitheatre ushered in a new era in its history, reopening in 2007.

Bledsoe said the County had originally earmarked about \$5 million to \$6 million for the renovation but, he said, “As we got into it, we were thinking of something at a much higher level.”

The final design included semicircular, tiered rows, with lawn space for additional seating and a tinsel fiberglass canopy suspended over the main stage.

With 75,000 tickets sold in just the last six months alone, the concert venue has managed to raise its profile over these years, attracting more and more people — a great many of them from out of town, which also boosts tourism.

It also continues to book top acts, which Bledsoe attributes to Murphy’s skill as a promoter. Murphy said the Amphitheatre places a high value on catering to artists, shuttling them to the beach, downtown or the Alligator Farm during their stay here.

Bledsoe recalled the time Harry Connick Jr. played and he came off the stage very thirsty. Connick, Jr. loved the Hyppo gourmet popsicle he was handed by staff to cool him off.

“Sometimes, it’s the only place an artist like Paul Simon or Jack Johnson will choose to play in Florida,” Murphy said.

Murphy said the Amphitheatre continues to build upon its growing reputation and has added popular events such as the Front Porch free music series and the new night market on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The venue also has some several capital improvement projects in the works, such as expanding space for local food vendors and adding more restrooms. That work is supposed to begin by the end of the year.

“We’re also trying to do what we can to make that experience for the audience and the artists great,” Murphy said.