



# Abingdon's Hidden Gem: Barter Theatre

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## At A Glance

- Located in historic Abingdon, VA
- (276) 628-3991
- [bartertheatre.com](http://bartertheatre.com)
- Tickets \$28-\$44 (Advanced tickets are recommended)
- Main: 506 seats  
Stage II: 167 seats
- Recognized as "The State Theatre of Virginia" since 1946
- Founder Robert Porterfield praised by President Kennedy in 1963
- Received Governor's Award for Excellence in Art in 1979

I have always loved the theatre. Growing up in rural Mountain City, TN, there was not a flood of artistic events in town; however, I was introduced to an amazing theatre a 45 minute drive away in historic Abingdon, VA. In 2001, when I was a small child, I was given the opportunity to travel to Barter Theatre to watch a Main Stage production of "Anne of Green Gables" with Mountain City Elementary. Over a decade later, I can still remember the wonder of that first visit to Barter Theatre. As I walked into the seating area, I couldn't stop looking around the large auditorium. The lush curtains decorating the walls, shimmering sconces lighting the dim aisles, and row upon row of seats leading up to the orchestra pit and marvelously decorated stage took my breath away. I had never

witnessed such a grand and timeless venue, and I thought it was impossible for anything to be more elegant. The remarkable first impression this professional theatre gave me has brought me back many times, and I'm sure I am not the only one had such an experience. But there are still many people living in the Tri-Cities area who have never stepped inside the doors.

This local theatre is not like the community theatres where teachers, retirees, and high school students take the stage on the side to entertain an audience. This theatre is home to professional resident actors who take their performances very seriously to provide quality entertainment to people not only from this area, but also to those who travel from around the country to experience the wonder a show at Barter brings.

## **THE HISTORY**

According to their official website, Barter Theatre was founded during the Great Depression by Robert Porterfield, a Saltville, Virginia native and aspiring actor. After incorporating in 1932, Barter opened the doors for its first production on June 10, 1933. This performance of John Golden and Hugh S. Stange's "After Tomorrow" entertained a sold out auditorium. How did people living in a time of economic crisis have the ability to spend money on entertainment? The answer lies with Porterfield's idea to make his theatre operate on a barter system. People could trade goods in exchange for admission to a play. In this rural area of Southwest Virginia, many farmers found themselves unable to sell their harvests due to lack of demand, so why not allow them to use it to purchase entertainment? This alternative payment method allowed patrons who could not afford the .40 ¢ to instead bring in the equivalent amount of food from their homes to cover admission. With this revolutionary idea in mind, Porterfield came up with Barter's original slogan, "With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good

laugh”. Roughly 80% of audience members chose to pay using the barter system during the Depression.

Today, Barter Theatre honors its bartering heritage by having at least one production per year where admission is a non-perishable food item to be donated to Feeding America, a nonprofit network of food banks with local locations in Kingsport, TN and Salem, VA. This is a great way to allow people who cannot normally afford the cost of a Barter play to attend while also helping feed the hungry Tri-Cities and surrounding areas. The next production to offer this form of payment has yet to be announced; however, it is usually during the month of June. Barter also offers “pay what you can” performances on the opening night of each show. On these nights, tickets are only available at the door for a donation of at least \$1. These performances keep with the theatre’s roots of aiming to provide entertainment to everyone, no matter their economic standing. Upcoming “pay what you can” performances are November 21<sup>st</sup> at 8 pm for “A Modern Christmas Carol” and November 25<sup>th</sup> at 7:30 pm for “Holiday Memories”.

Barter Theatre is also a founding member the League of Resident Theatres (LORT); this means a set number of actors are hired to work together to perform all of the shows on the calendar for the year. Having resident actors not only allows the players to have a sense of job security with their performance, but it also allows audiences to see familiar faces when they attend multiple times per season. One of my personal



*Nicholas Piper as Dracula, 2007.*

favorites is long-time resident Nicholas Piper. I first encountered Piper in his starring role as Count Dracula in 2007. I was blown away by his ability to capture the mystery and dangerousness surrounding the character. Although I was seated in the middle of the Main Stage

auditorium (a considerable distance from the stage), he was able to exaggerate his movements enough to enhance the audience's relativity to the scene without appearing over the top. I have since watched him grace the stage as the creature in "Frankenstein" and Sherlock Holmes in "Sherlock Holmes and The Case of the Jersey Lily" and I have never failed to be amazed by his outstanding performances. I feel the need to browse the calendar each year and look for his name in the cast list to help determine my next visit.

## THE STAGES

If you are planning on attending a performance at Barter, one of the first things you should think about is which stage to visit. Personally, I would recommend the Main Stage for



*"A Christmas Carol", 2011.*

first time attendees. Barter's Main Stage is a proscenium stage with a 506 seat capacity. This space is used for musicals and more traditional, large casted productions. This stage is definitely the right choice if you are interested in seeing not only a great acting performance, but also elaborate costumes, intricate set designs, and a multitude of props that show just how much detail the cast and crew at Barter puts into each and every one of their plays. One memorable play I attended at Main Stage was "A Christmas Carol" in 2011. This production contained a deep set with row upon row of columns that allowed additional props to be rolled between them to set up each scene. The costumes captured the essence of Victorian style with their large skirts and deep jewel tones. The audience was intrigued by the vast number of actors on the stage whose voices boomed throughout the auditorium. This performance was everything a Main Stage production is about: classic tales,

intricate costumes, exaggerated emotions, and elaborate set designs. You definitely will not leave the auditorium without realizing just how much attention to detail goes into these shows.

On the other hand, if you are an experienced theatre goer and wish to focus on the action rather than the background, Stage II would better suite you. Barter's Stage II is a very intimate setting. The acting space is only a few feet wide and features no "backstage" area for actors to enter and exit from. Instead they usually have chairs off to one side where they sit and wait until their next appearance. This close layout allows 167 audience members to sit just a few feet from the actors in a steeply slanted stadium style seating arrangement. Sitting in such close proximity to the thrust stage gives the actors' facial expressions and even the smallest gestures the chance to shine (something that is often lost in a Main Stage production due to the distance from the



*"Jacob Marley's A Christmas Carol", 2006.*

stage). Barter usually reserves this space for their "newer" and "edgier" plays, or simply for plays that have a more minimalistic set design. In 2006, I attended "Jacob Marley's A Christmas Carol" at Barter Stage II. This production was just as wonderful as the Main Stage one I attended later on; however, the focus was strictly on the

story. The show contained a very minimalistic set that did not change from scene to scene. This forced the audience to allow their minds to really step outside the reality of what was around them and imagine the scene being described. My only complaint about this particular show was the fact that actors not in a scene sat on chairs located in unlit portions of the stage. I found myself being distracted by them quite a bit throughout the performance, which is why I

recommend more seasoned audience members to choose this venue. Despite this small drawback I have discovered at Stage II, the overall experiences I have had there have been marvelous.

## OTHER ATTRACTIONS AT BARTER

Barter Theatre's grounds are also home to Bob's at Barter, a coffee and sandwich shop. This newly renovated restaurant is adjacent to Barter Stage II and is open before and after all shows to entertain audiences. Attendees can stop in and try anything from a flavored coffee to a sweet treat. Barter Theatre offers special package deals for visitors interested in trying out the shop after the show. Barter's Sweet Deal package includes 2 tickets, 2 desserts, and 2 coffees for only \$85, a nice discount from the normal cost.

Each of Barter's stages contains a gift shop to browse before and after performances. In these shops you can find not only souvenirs, apparel, and show memorabilia, but also unique and affordable jewelry from across the globe. My favorite aspects of these shops are the glass cases along the walls housing show props from various productions throughout the years. These give visitors the chance to view parts of the play up close they are not normally exposed to.

## Famous Alumni

☐ **Gregory Peck** – Academy Award Winner for “To Kill A Mockingbird”

☐ **Patricia Neal** – Academy Award Winner for “Hud”; “Breakfast at Tiffany’s”

☐ **Earnest Borgnine** – Academy Award Winner for “Marty”; “McHale’s Navy”

☐ **Ned Beatty** – Academy Award Winner for “Network”; “Deliverance”

☐ **Hume Cronyn** – Tony Award Winner for “Hamlet”

☐ **Gary Collins** – television actor and show host

☐ **Frances Fisher** – “Titanic”; “Striptease”

☐ **James Burrows** – Creator & Writer “Cheers”; Writer “Friends”; Producer & Writer “Will & Grace”; “Frasier”

☐ **Wayne Night** – “Seinfeld”; “3<sup>rd</sup> Rock from the Sun”; “Jurassic Park”

☐ **Larry Linville** – “M.A.S.H.”

☐ **Will Bigham** – 2007 Winner of reality show “On The Lot”

## CHILDREN'S RESOURCES

Barter Theatre does more than just entertain audiences. They also work to help children who want to pursue acting through The Barter Youth Academy. Children sign up for this group of acting workshops to learn from the cast and crew at Barter and put on productions to see what working for a professional theatre is like. While working with Johnson County Young Artists in Johnson County, TN, I was able to talk to several children about their experience working with The Barter Youth Academy. All of them loved their time and felt more confident about pursuing an acting dream since they were trained by professionals. This is a wonderful opportunity for children living in this rural region who would have to travel many miles to find a similar



*Children performing an exercise at The Barter Youth Academy.*

program. While attending the academy is not free, scholarships are available.

Barter also works to help area schools incorporate a trip to the theatre into their required curriculum. Free printable worksheets are available online for teachers to do with students before the trip. These worksheets are made to align with classroom teaching standards. Student Matinees with free talkback sessions with the cast after performances are offered so students can interact and learn more about the production. Some productions are even taken outside of Barter Theatre and into the school's auditorium so there is no need to travel for a Barter experience. The plays presented in this setting are age appropriate productions, usually based on children's books, to go hand-in-hand with curriculum.

Barter Theatre is a magical place for everyone. It has found ways to stay true to its rich history to this day through its efforts to allow everyone to be able to experience the joy of

professional theatre no matter the age or class. Whether you attend Main Stage or Stage II, the performance is sure to blow you away and inspire you to start planning your next visit. Barter's cast and crew truly puts their all into each and every performance and they will leave audience members with an experience they will never forget.

**◆ To learn more about Barter Theatre, try visiting these great websites: ◆**

- [BarterTheatre.com](http://BarterTheatre.com) – the official website of Barter Theatre
- [EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Barter\\_Theatre](http://EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Barter_Theatre) – a publication of Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, in partnership with Library of Virginia