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April 10, 2023

Dinner Theater: A Revival

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An abstract of

a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences

of Emory University in partial fulfillment

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Theater Studies

2023

Abstract

Dinner Theater: A Revival

By Tess Rosenthal

Dinner theater is often associated with tourists, senior citizens, and bland food. However, it reflects why generation z and millennials engage with art as well as addresses the most common barriers to entry for generation z and millennials. This project attempts to create a dinner theater concept designed primarily for young adults. It does so through examining the qualities of dinner theater that make it an effective storytelling medium and looking at the past and present of dinner theater to guide the development of the new concept. To develop the process, the project examined three parts of dinner theater: the theater, the dinner, and the business. The culmination of this development process was to create a business plan to examine the viability of said dinner theater concept as an operating entity.

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I have to thank my advisor, Ariel Fristoe. She has not only been generous with her time but also her expertise. Although I came to Emory with an interest in arts administration, Ariel has helped transform that interest into a passion. I am truly grateful for everything she has done to guide me through the process. This thesis could not have happened without her.

I would also like to thank Prof. Brent Glenn and Dr. Morgan Ward for serving on my committee. I appreciate the contribution of both time and knowledge to my honors thesis.

I cannot go without thanking Dr. Michael Evenden who has encouraged and guided me from day one of this thesis. I must thank him for bearing with me through the chaos of this thesis process.

I must express my gratitude to all my friends and family who have helped me get to this point. Without their undying support and encouragement, I could not have completed this honors project.

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INTRODUCTION

In popular culture, dinner theater is portrayed as a goofy tourist trap that is populated by down-on-their-luck actors. A dinner theater actress compared her experience to its portrayal in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and described her job as, “we just had to keep Pat and Marge awake and make them laugh enough that they didn’t mind that they were eating dry chicken breast and canned green beans.”¹ Though not the most enticing description, it is what many people picture when they hear dinner theater. Dinner theater is also closely associated with senior citizens, as noted by dinner theater expert William Lynk.² However, the concept is solid and, in every idea, there is potential for something better.

It is hard to pinpoint when my personal relationship with dinner theater began. As a 21-year-old, I am not the target audience for dinner theater, however, I was raised on the Food Network, musical theater, and Jewish holidays like Passover that require storytelling as a part of a meal. I also distinctly remember when I was in my elementary school book club and it was my turn to host, we were reading a book about a family of Jewish immigrants and they talked about food in the book, so my mom suggested we make stew as the snack for the book club to mimic the food that the characters ate. Food helps tell stories and it brings people together in a similar way to theater. I was six when I saw my first Broadway show. I remember that it was on my birthday and before heading to the theater, we had a Carvel cake that my dad and sister had gotten earlier in the day. After my siblings and I had performed in a play, we would always go to one bakery to get a cake to celebrate. My whole life, theater, and food have been connected

¹ Christine Stoddard, 2016, “My Life as a Dinner Theatre Actor,” Paste Magazine, December 20, 2016, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/theatre/my-life-as-a-theatre-dinner-actor/>.

² William M. Lynk, *Dinner Theatre: A Survey and Directory*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993, p. 1.

subconsciously, which has allowed me to build such a deep connection to my work in theater. These memories are worth sharing, and dinner theater provides the perfect medium to do so.

One of the reasons I strive to share dinner theater with a wider audience is that many people view theater as a dying art. However, according to a 2020 document released by the National Endowment for the Arts, a study found that millennials and generation Z are the generations most interested in getting involved in the arts.³ It offers a promising future for theater. The study highlighted that the most common motivation for attending arts was to socialize and spend time with friends and family. It also noted that people cited lack of time and cost as the most prohibitive barriers to arts attendance.⁴

Dinner theater highlights the social element of both theater and dining. It utilizes a unique shared experience. With unexplored avenues and new target audiences, dinner theater has the potential to become more than something that just keeps people awake with mediocre food. It can be a memorable entrance into the special world of theater. Quality food and quality entertainment at a reasonable price are hard to beat.

Throughout the course of this paper, I intend to showcase the viability of a dinner theater as a theatrical experience aimed at a new generation. Firstly, I will examine what defines dinner theater, why food and theater go well together, and look at the past and present of dinner theater. Then having examined what makes dinner theater an effective medium, I will develop a business plan for a dinner theater with the intent of appealing to young adult audiences.

³ Chris Dwyer et al., “Why We Engage: Attending, Creating, and Performing Art,” *National Endowment for the Arts* (The National Endowment for the Arts, September 2020), accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Why-We-Engage-08.2022.pdf>.

⁴ *ibid.*

CHAPTER ONE

What is Dinner Theater?

Dinner theater in its modern form has only existed since the 1960s. In tracking its evolution and predicting its future, we must first establish a base definition of what dinner theater actually is. In *Dinner Theater: A Survey and Directory* (1993), William Lynk offers his definition: “Dinner theater is the combination of a quality meal and a live theatrical presentation, presumably in the same room, at a value-oriented ticket price.”⁵ To break this definition into its components, we must begin with the quality meal. Things have evolved since Lynk’s 1993 definition, and some dinner-theater-adjacent experiences are now centered around unique cocktails and smaller plates. Thus, to encompass a wider range of content emerging in the field, the “quality meal” is now a high-quality selection of food and/or drinks. As for Lynk’s “live theatrical presentation,” the vague wording is actually perfect for this experience, because all it includes is a level of spectacle that leaves room for various performances outside of a traditional proscenium theater. And, while Lynk presumes that the performance and refreshments are in the same room, for a variety of reasons, this will not always be the case now. The meal and the presentation may take place in the same location but not always in the same room. The final element in Lynk’s definition is a value-oriented ticket price. Although it is important, the ticket price is not crucial to the core of the medium, but rather, historically, it has served as a strong marketing tool. Thus, the definition I will be using is “a theatrical experience in which the audience also enjoys food and/or beverages, all in a single environment, with a practical price point.”

⁵ William M. Lynk, *Dinner Theatre: A Survey and Directory*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993, p. 1.

Why Dinner Theater?

Dinner and a show are a typical combination for those spending a night out; however, the two are most often done separately. However, theater can benefit greatly from the direct effects of food, which we know can enhance the theater-going experience. Susan Smillie writes about her experience and hopes in her 2007 article “Theatre of Food” in *The Guardian*: “ It seems to be a growing genre, as more and more artists explore the visceral connections between food, taste, smell, memory, and storytelling, and provoke powerful reactions from their audiences in the process.”⁶ She continues to muse about her favorite performances surrounding food. Most of the performances she describes are about actors preparing and/or eating food on stage; however, she expresses excitement at the potential of getting to eat as an audience member in a way integrated into the entertainment. Simile’s excitement is not unique. In the years since her article, the audience getting fed thematically has made it to Broadway stages. In Sara Bareilles’s musical *Waitress* (2016-2020), audience members had the opportunity to purchase pies in jars; in David Malloy’s *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* (2016-2017), perogies were handed out to the audience by the actors on stage in the middle of the show. In Daniel Fish’s 2019 Broadway revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*, audience members could line up on stage to get chili and cornbread; Off-Broadway, In 2016, New York’s Barrow Street Theater mounted an immersive production of Stephen Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* and served up meat pies for the audience while they were seated in Ms. Lovett’s pie shop. Mainstream implantation of small aspects of dinner theater serves as proof that audiences are open to dinner theater ideas when they are not branded as such.

⁶ Susan Smillie, “Theatre of Food,” *The Guardian*, May 31, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2007/may/31/theatreoffood1>.

Smillie highlights the connection food has with memory and storytelling, both in her accounts of actual theater experiences and in her stated desire for more.

In his book *Hungering For America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, Hasia R. Diner expands on the point: “The food which came out of our ancestral ovens represents to them powerful legacies of continuity, linking [Americans] to faraway places, most of which they have never visited.”⁷ The affective power of food is impossible to deny. Certain flavors can connect us to places and people. Although Diner specifically studied food in specific cultures, these principles do not exist in a microcosm. As seen in most blogs posting recipes, there is a good story behind every meal. Each recipe posted comes with a long story of how that recipe came to be. Although not performed, such stories mimic the narrative that fuels theater. Additionally, TV shows like those on The Food Network paint similar stories around food and portray meals as communal events. *Barefoot Contessa* is a prime example of that, where even from afar, Ina Garten manages to invite the viewer into her peaceful Hamptons life through sharing food with her friends, and her husband Jeffery. The relationships forged between the giver and receiver of food mirror the relationships forged between the actor and audience in the theater. They both allow the receiver an intimate peek into a story. Both are acts of giving and kindness as explained by the essayist and cultural critic Lewis Hyde. He highlights food and arts as gifts specifically.⁸ It makes sense to pair the two together to create a doubly impactful gift to the audience. Overall, food carries is a powerful tool, not only to build theatrical immersion, but also to tell stories on its own.

⁷ Hasia R. Diner, “Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration,” in *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. xvi.

⁸ Lewis Hyde, in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (London: Vintage, 1999), xii-xiii, 9.

Dining and theater further complement each other because they are both highly communal activities. Food's communal properties are deeply ingrained in the human experience. Archeologists have found evidence at Qesem Cave near Tel Aviv, that showcases a shared meal from over 300,000 years ago, and at Mt. Vesuvius indicating a meal being prepared with the intent to be shared.⁹ Eating together is built into various traditions and cultures. In America, no holiday showcases this better than Thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving meal is a treasured tradition that oftentimes represents a time to get together with friends and family and eat. Even as Americans come to realize the harmful origins of the holiday, many simply view it as a time to connect over the turkey. Life milestones like weddings and birthdays are celebrated with cake. Food is also used to mourn. For example, in Jewish tradition, the mourning family will have what is called a *Seduat Havara'ah*, or a "meal of recovery".¹⁰ The meal, often featuring eggs and bagels to signify the cycle of life, is provided by neighbors and friends to serve as a reminder that the mourner is not alone in grief. Over the course of the Jewish mourning period known as "shivah," it is also customary for others to bring meals to the mourners as a similar sign of support. Meals serve as a reminder of community, which greatly resembles the communal and shared experience that comes with attending the theater.

The History of Dinner Theater

In examining the future of dinner theater, it is crucial to look at its past as well as its present. Although there is no clear linear evolution of dinner theater, several different categories exist. There are two theaters that get credit for being the first dinner theaters in the United States:

⁹ "Joy of Food," 2019, National Geographic. 2019. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/foodfeatures/joy-of-food/>

¹⁰ Yehuda Shurpin, "Food and Shivah: Customs and Traditions - Chabad.org," *Chabad.org*, accessed March 13, 2023, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4171631/jewish/Food-and-Shivah-Customs-and-Traditions.htm.

The Barksdale Theater, of Hannover, Virginia, and Candlelight Dinner Theater, of Chicago, Illinois. They took two very different approaches to the invention of dinner theater, with only one still surviving.

The Barksdale Theater is the surviving originator, though it has since merged with Theater IV to create Virginia Repertory Theater. In detailing the history of the original dinner theater, I will use the Barksdale name. Founded by a group of actors in 1953, Barksdale Theater was located in the Hanover Tavern.¹¹ As they began producing theater, they found that people also wanted to eat out when attending the theater. So, in response, they opened a restaurant in another room in the building. Nowadays, the Hanover Tavern operates separately from Virginia Repertory. Virginia Repertory uses the theater space in the building, but the restaurant, located in a separate room is managed independently of the theater. They still maintain a relationship and encourage those out for dinner to see the theater and those out for theater to grab dinner all in the same location.¹² Around the same time in Illinois, William Pullinsi founded the Candlelight Dinner Theater in 1952.¹³ The main difference regarding the actual food between Candlelight and Barksdale is that the dinner at Candlelight was served in the same room as the performance. Unlike Barksdale, Candlelight was unable to survive.

Looking at the two original American dinner theaters, Barksdale separated its ticket price and food price. The food was an optional addition to the experience whereas, with Candlelight, the food was combined with the show — the emphasis was on value over quality. Finally, Barksdale (now Virginia Repertory theater) operates as a non-profit, giving them more artistic freedom and alternative sources of income to help fund the artistic and administrative costs,

¹¹ “History,” *Virginia Rep*, Accessed September 2, 2022, <https://va-rep.org/history.html>.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ James Oseland, “Dinner Theatre, U.S.A.” *American Theatre*, April 1, 1998.,<https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsglr.A20609057&site=eds-live>.

whereas Candlelight operated as a for-profit business, which means their income was limited to ticket sales and thus was always at the mercy of the audience.

Forms of Dinner Theater (Present)

The traditional dinner theater that mirrors the models of Candlelight and Barksdale is slowly losing relevance and no longer has the cultural foothold that it once did. One theater that follows a combination of the two is the Atlanta Shakespeare Tavern which was founded in the 80s. It more closely resembles Barksdale, as it operates as a non-profit with an optional meal separate from the ticket price. The difference is that the meal takes place within the theater with drinks and desserts available for purchase at intermission. Primarily performing Shakespeare, the Atlanta Shakespeare tavern has carved out a niche in the Atlanta theater scene and provides a fun accompaniment to the traditional theatergoing experience.¹⁴

A close relative to the traditional dinner theater is the interactive dinner theater. The most prominent mode of this style is the Murder Mystery Dinners. They actively get the audience involved in the comic mystery and have the audience shape the outcome of the piece of theater they see. This is a step outside of the traditional theater comfort zone and appeals to a different audience because it gamifies the theater-going experience. People who enjoy traditional theater may not enjoy the Murder Mystery experience as much; however, those who like solving mysteries and may otherwise opt for an escape room on a night out would be drawn towards this type of theater. It creates a social environment, not just with the actors, but also with the other people aiming to solve the murder.¹⁵ The dinner adds value to the event and makes it a one-stop

¹⁴ “Atlanta Shakespeare Co.,” Atlanta Shakespeare Co., 2022, <https://www.shakespearetavern.com/>.

¹⁵ “What to Expect,” Atlanta, GA, October 11, 2022, <https://www.thedinnerdetective.com/atlanta/what-to-expect/>.

shop; however, in most cases, the Murder Mystery Dinner's dining element, like the other theaters discussed here, adds to the experience but does not advance the storytelling.

Dinner theater makes for a great large-scale attraction as well. Perhaps the most famous large-scale dinner theater is the Medieval Times Dinner and Tournament. Founded in Spain in the late 1960s, Medieval Times was inspired by the events that the founder's family used to host in the 11th century.¹⁶ It came to the United States in 1983, settling 15 minutes away from Walt Disney World.¹⁷ Medieval Times has become a relatively famous example of dinner theater, staking its claim in major United States tourist destinations like Orlando, Florida, and Buena Park, California.¹⁸ Medieval Times particularly targets families. They not only provide a huge spectacle, with jousting, princesses, and knights, but they also host birthday celebrations and provide educational material¹⁹. The menu is well suited to the entertainment and, while not one hundred percent historically authentic, fits the theme well enough to add a level of immersion and excitement. By marketing it as a fun experience with educational elements, Medieval Times appeals to parents, kids, and kids at heart.

More recently there has been an emergence of immersive pop-ups. These pop-ups are often tied to popular media in other forms. *The Queen's Ball: A Bridgerton Experience* is one of the most recent and relevant examples, catching fire on social media as people dressed up to emulate the Regency style from the famed Netflix show. Done in collaboration with Netflix, the Bridgerton experience has traveled and continues to travel throughout North America.²⁰ The

¹⁶Melita Marie Garza, "Spanish Dinner Entertainment Harks Back to Medieval Times," *Chicago Tribune*, 1991, accessed March 13, 2023, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1991-06-18-9102230919-story.html>.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ "About Medieval Times," *Medieval Times Dinner & Tournament*, Accessed September 2, 2022, <https://www.medievaltimes.com/about>.

¹⁹ "Educational Materials," *Medieval Times Dinner & Tournament*, Accessed September 2, 2022, <https://www.medievaltimes.com/education>.

²⁰ "The Queen's Ball: A Bridgerton Experience in Los Angeles," *The Queen's Ball: A Bridgerton Experience*, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://bridgertonexperience.com/los-angeles/>.

appeal of this is getting to step into a favorite TV show and live in that universe through interacting with their favorite characters. With cocktails to match, the Bridgerton experience does not account for a full dinner but still uses the principles of dinner theater as a tool of immersion. With TV and movies being the most commonplace media, these events allow the theatrical to intersect with the digital to further develop the world of the show. The nature of these experiences brings theater into the pop-culture zeitgeist and opens it to new audiences as entertainment and media become more and more intertwined.

Among the dinner theater variants, experimental dining concepts are the furthest from the experience of traditional dinner theater. Although often not employing actors, these dining concepts rely on the principles of theater to build spectacle around a meal. *Le Petit Chef* is a perfect example. On their website, *Le Petit Chef* describes their product as “immersive theatre and dining combined.”²¹ With several locations around the world and on cruise ships, diners watch as a story is literally projected on a plate to detail the creation of the meal by a tiny cartoon chef.²² The exact story and meal vary from location to location with past themes including the four seasons and the history of food. The animation is supplemented by an original score, small sound effects, and bits of dialogue as the chef brings the dish to life on the table.²³ Whimsical and creative, it provides entertainment outside of just a meal and company and thus is worth examining.

²¹ Le Petit Chef, 2019, “Le Petit Chef,” Lepetitchef.com, 2019, <https://lepetitchef.com/>.

²² “Le Petit Chef on Broadway,” The View NYC - Le Petit Chef on Broadway, October 21, 2022, <https://www.theviewnyc.com/restaurant/lepetitchef/>.

²³ Patricia Kelly Yeo, 2022, “The Uncomplicated, IG-Friendly Delights of Downtown’s Le Petit Chef,” Time out Los Angeles, March 2, 2022. <https://www.timeout.com/los-angeles/news/the-uncomplicated-social-media-friendly-delights-of-le-petit-chef-at-the-ritz-carlton-030222>.

The Future of Dinner Theater

There is no one way to make dinner theater, however, the most recent rise in popularity is the immersive pop-up. Ultimately, people look for quality. They want high-quality food, drinks, and shows in one form or another. The quality must continue to evolve as new creative ideas enter the marketplace both culinarily and theatrically. There is great potential in dinner theater; to harness that potential, it is crucial to pay attention to implement inventive strategies and observe audience trends.

Another key component to understanding the future of dinner theater is looking at the key demographics of the industry. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the theater industry has struggled. However, it is slowly returning to pre-pandemic numbers. To get an accurate understanding of the market of dinner theater, it is important to look at the theater industry as a whole. The most recent study on the average expenditure on live entertainment ends in 2020 when the average amount spent fell to a low of \$20.61. However, this statistic is not representative of the direction the industry is going. With fewer theater offerings and smaller virtual performances being the only representative, 2020 theater pricing was significantly lower. To reflect on the direction expenditure is going, we will look back at 2019, when the average expenditure was \$62.69.²⁴ Through ticket sales alone, in 2019 not-for-profit theaters made an average of \$1.79 million. In 2020, it only decreased to 1.5 million.²⁵ Ticket sales remained fairly consistent because virtual programming lowered prices and overall made theater more accessible. This is a key consideration when building a pricing model for the future. When

²⁴ Statista, "Statista Dossier on Theater and Broadway in the United States," Data set, *Average Annual Expenditure on Plays, Theater, Opera, and Concerts per Consumer Unit in the United States from 2013 to 2020 (in U.S. Dollars)*, 2022, <https://www-statista-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/study/13148/theater-and-broadway-statista-dossier/>.

²⁵ Statista, "Statista Dossier on Theater and Broadway in the United States," Data set, *Average income of not-for-profit theaters through ticket sales in the United States from 2016 to 2020 (in million U.S. dollars)*, 2022, <https://www-statista-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/study/13148/theater-and-broadway-statista-dossier/>.

examining the price point in the past, not only should it be determined by other models at a competitive rate, but also by the cost of living and average income in the area determined.

As displayed through this chapter, theater and food are highly compatible experiences. The need for stories and shared experiences is ever-present, and dinner theater fulfills that need. Older audiences are familiar with the tried-and-true concept, however, it has not caught on with the next generation of theater-goers and consumers. Dinner theater needs a refresh for the social media age for the industry to regain relevance.

Through looking at the past and present of dinner theater, there are several things that have persevered. Firstly, a familiar show or IP. In traditional dinner theater, beloved musicals typically make up a season. As seen with recent traveling pop-ups, people love getting to step into the world of their favorite TV shows and movies. Secondly, novelty is key. The longstanding players in the industry such as Medieval Times and murder mystery dinners have a niche that is easily recognizable and provide interactive environments. Going forward, these two ideas will serve as a guide to developing the concept for a successful re-invention of dinner theater. First, will examine the elements of dinner theater separately: the theater, the dinner, and the business. This examination will serve as background for developing a business plan to assess the viability of a new dinner theater concept.

CHAPTER TWO

The Theater

Finding the Content

As previously stated, one of the most important elements of a successful dinner theater is a recognizable property or theme. To narrow down properties, numerous things needed to be considered.

Firstly, the property or theme must be something that warrants a desire for immersion and good food. Looking at existing examples, Medieval Times promises a grand feast themed to grand banquets of royalty and promises to bring the audience into a world with knights and princesses. Similarly, *The Bridgerton Experience* allowed guests to experience the colorful, regal world of *Bridgerton* with thematic cocktails named after elements of the show.

With pre-existing properties, licensing fees also play a role. The annual fee to utilize someone else's property can raise expenses, serving as a non-ideal business move. The larger themed dinner theaters play a different role than what I aim to achieve. They focus on large stunts and broad characterizations rather than plot and character. So, to find the perfect property, I turned to the public domain.

The public domain is a collection of private creations that become available to the public without copyright after a certain period. The public domain is highly limited as much of the content in the public domain is antiquated and would not make for good theater. Others, most popularly the Brothers Grimm stories, have become recognizable through adaptations that have since been copyrighted, and thus the familiar and expected elements would be impossible to achieve. For example, Disney's *Cinderella* varies from its Brothers Grimm source material,

however, the imagery of *Cinderella* that most people would recognize is that of Disney's copyright.

With these criteria in mind, I narrowed down my property selection to two properties: *The Great Gatsby* and the library of Jane Austen. Between the two, Jane Austen's collection fit an idyllic time period, would be more accessible to audiences of all ages, and provide unique dining experiences like high tea, which often comes at a heavy price. Additionally, the works of Jane Austen would allow for growth, change, and variety which is crucial to sustaining a business long term.

The Plot and Characters

To begin, there is a need to select a singular work by Jane Austen. This will be a show that runs for several years but still warrants return audiences. The work I have chosen is *Emma*. It is perfect for dinner theater because of the large presence of food in the story. Additionally, although not as recognizable as *Pride and Prejudice*, it still holds a large place in pop culture with a recent adaptation and for its role as the basis for the 1995 teen comedy *Clueless*.

Emma tells the story of Emma Woodhouse, a wealthy young woman in 19th-century England, whose naivety leads to failed attempts at matchmaking and love often ignoring the advice of her handsome friend, Mr. Knightly.

The play will closely follow the plot of the novel, however, moments for audience interactions will be added. For example, in the scene that hosts a ball, audience members will be brought up to dance alongside the actors to highlight that they are a part of the story. Additionally, the famous Box Hill picnic scene has Emma insulting Miss Bates in jest. Additional space will be added for the actress playing Emma to improvise and in jest, "roast"

members of the audience, making it a more memorable moment. Additionally, this will add to Emma's atonement sequence allowing more audience interaction.

The cast will be made up of twelve actors, some of whom will play multiple roles. The characters are:

Emma Woodhouse: a well-intentioned but misguided wealthy young woman pursuing matchmaking.

Mr. George Knightly: Emma's close friend and only critic. He leads with his morality.

Harriet Smith: Emma's mentee and latest matchmaking project. Sweet and simple, Harriet has an unknown lineage and thus status.

Robert Martin: A kind, hard-working farmer who courts Harriet Smith.

Frank Churchill: Well-liked and personable, he is manipulative to hide his secret engagement to Jane Fairfax. Mr. Weston's son.

Jane Fairfax: Miss Bates' incredibly talented niece of whom Emma is jealous. Secretly engaged to Frank Churchill.

Miss Bates: Jane Fairfax's spinster aunt who is endlessly chatty.

Mrs. Weston: Emma's former governess and surrogate mother figure. Emma takes credit for her marriage to Mr. Weston which inspires her to pursue matchmaking.

Mr. Weston: Frank Churchill's father who is sociable and amenable. He is a window making his marriage to Mrs. Weston his second.

Mr. Woodhouse: Emma's father. His concerns about his poor health are aided by Emma's attempts to care for him.

Mr. Elton: A vicar whom Emma mistakenly tries to match with Harriet. He reveals he was only kind to Harriet in his pursuit of Emma for her money.

Mrs. Elton: Pretentious and patronizing but wealthy, she is Mr. Elton's second choice after Emma for marriage due to her finances (though less than Emma's).

By leveraging the already compelling story that Jane Austen wrote, dinner theater can encourage new audiences. It adds a fun level of interaction that remains memorable. When the fourth wall is broken, the audience becomes more invested in the show and thus the whole experience.

CHAPTER THREE

The Dinner

Crucial to dinner theater is the food. To create a good meal for the experience, it is important to remain on theme. Luckily, in choosing to do a Jane Austen-themed experience, there is plenty of inspiration for a thematic meal. Additionally, in choosing *Emma* as the theater portion of the evening, the portrayal of food in the novel will shine through the dinner for the guests. There will be two types of meals at the dinner theater. One will be a traditional three-course dinner which will be served during evening performances. Weekend matinees however will feature something that often goes hand in hand with what people think of the British upper class: afternoon tea. The experiences will be unique by making choices that will allow guests to feel as though they are transported back in time to Regency England. Although not entirely historically accurate, as the food then is not entirely suited to most modern American tastes, it will mimic the style and flavors of such cooking.

Jane Austen had a well-documented relationship with food. It shines through in her novels with descriptions of opulent foods like white soup in *Pride and Prejudice* and roasted lamb in *Emma*. Additionally, Jane Austen's sister-in-law and close friend Martha Lloyd compiled a book with all the recipes that Jane had eaten. Jane grew up middle class so the food she grew up with is different from that of her characters who oftentimes are the highest class.²⁶ She grew up with a garden and fresh-grown vegetables which provided a luxury that was inaccessible once she moved to the city.²⁷ In Jane Austen's life and novels, food is representative of where you are and who you are which is why her work compliments dinner theater so well.

²⁶ Peggy Hickman and Jane Austen, *A Jane Austen Household Book*, 1977, 10.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 18-19.

In creating a menu, I wanted to make sure I was including several elements. First, something that provides a level of immersion. For that, I look towards the foods mentioned throughout *Emma* and Martha Lloyd's cookbook. Next, is elevating those foods to modern-day expectations of quality and taste. Notably, food trends for restaurants have become significantly less heavy, and with modern inventions like refrigeration, and fresher vegetables year-round. This is reflected in the inclusion of more vegetables and less heavy meat.

To keep food expenses minimal, there will be a pre-fix menu with two options for each course. Though the menu will be limited, adjustments for those with dietary restrictions will be available because excluding those with dietary restrictions would cut off an entire customer base. Additionally, menus will be sent out prior to the performance so food will be easier to produce in advance. This will streamline kitchen activity and make it easier to have a kitchen safe for those with allergies. There will also be a set cocktail menu in which all drinks will have non-alcoholic counterparts. There will be more options at the bar, however, the included drink will only be from the set menu.

For the first course, the menu will offer an asparagus and arugula salad. The inspiration for this dish comes from a conversation in *Emma* where Miss Bates cites asparagus as a point of contention in a meal with Mr. Woodhouse. In addition, the pea soup comes from the recipes of Martha Lloyd while being inspired by Ms. Bates' excitement about soup at the ball in chapter II of volume III in *Emma*. They both appeal to the modern sensibility of freshness and health with tributes to the time period of the material. Although not obvious, it allows a hint of theming without sacrificing modern taste or quality. The second course is inspired by two different meals in *Emma*, first is the cottage pie, like a shepherd's pie which is inspired by the cold pigeon pies mentioned in the picnic scene. It will be a vegetarian option for audience members. The other

course will be a lamb dish with broccoli puree. Inspired by the large Christmas dinner that features mutton, the dish is a lighter take on a grand lamb entree. Finally, the desserts are also inspired by *Emma*. The first of which is the wedding cake. The novel opens and closes with a wedding and the cake is a central point of conversation in the opening scene, so, by giving the audience a chance to try the wedding cake, a simple vanilla cake with a nice buttercream and some berry jam, it will immerse them farther. Additionally, Mr. Woodworth brags about his apple tarts that use real apples as opposed to preserves. This mention of real apples is a signifier of his wealth and having those apple tarts will give those who try it a sense of the wealthy life.

The drink menu will be more modern taking a more abstract approach to immersion. For example, the Gin Austen (a pun impossible to refuse), uses lavender flavor as a key ingredient. This is because lavender-infused water was used as a cosmetic product and a recipe for such was featured in Martha Lloyd's cookbook. The Strawberry Field channels the strawberry fields that serve as a location in *Emma* as though you are tasting the fruit of the character's labor after they've picked strawberries. Finally, the Highbury serves as a tribute to the importance of teatime in regency English culture. See sample menus below.



Fig. 1 and 2, the dinner and drink menus.

CHAPTER THREE

The Business

The Businesses Model

Theaters around the United States either operate as for-profit businesses or as non-profit organizations. Most regional theaters around the United States operate as non-profit organizations. However, most dinner theaters operate as commercial institutions. In developing the idea, I opted to operate this dinner theater as a non-profit organization for several reasons. The most surface-level reason is that nonprofit theaters receive tax-exempt status. This means more of the money can be put into the art and the people making it. With the ability to receive tax-deductible donations, there is no financial obligation to get money back to investors. For donors, the art is the return on investment. It also opens the opportunity to apply for several grants which also provide an alternate funding source. Theaters are not safe bets, and the safety net of grants and donations makes operations easier. In 2019, on average, contributed income made up 43% of a theater's income and the percentage has only grown with declining ticket sales amidst the industry's slow recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸

Although most dinner theaters are commercial ventures, the non-profit nature of the dinner theater for this project is its mission. Because it is being created with the intent to drive new audiences to the theater and help strengthen the arts scene, it has a greater purpose which is better served by the non-profit business model. The mission-driven experience inspires participation and engagement. It is being created with the intent of something good. Although for-profit organizations can certainly enhance the community, non-profit organizations exist with

²⁸ Daniel F. Fonner et al., "Theatre Facts 2021," 2022, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Co-d3NPBOiUfx7bvgTOAydFVvxtHGCNeB2bbAUReYjo/edit?usp=sharing>.

the intent to do so. Finally, the added financial support allows the ability to reduce ticket prices. This makes it more accessible to people who would not otherwise be able to attend the theater, especially young adults and students who are likely to have less disposable income than those further into their careers. Price is a barrier to arts patronage. Baumol's cost disease highlights one of the reasons arts become more expensive. Wages are rising; however, the amount of product being produced does not. Thus, the work becomes more expensive to produce over time but does not create as much profit at the same price. The ability to operate as nonprofit helps compensate for some of the cost disease by assisting with some of the decreased profits that remain with keeping the product at a lower price.

The Importance of Social Media

The influence social media has on society is irrefutable. Seven in ten Americans are on social media, making it the ideal space to hear about new things.²⁹ Additionally, 80 percent of consumers make buying decisions based on recommendations from friends and family and social media brings that directly to them in both direct and indirect ways.³⁰ 83% of people also say that they use Instagram to find new products or services.³¹ So, it is crucial to draw in people from social media to your physical space, especially in an age where most things are accessible online. Listicles of "the most Instagramable places" frequently pop up when researching cities, restaurants, and even museums.

²⁹ Rebecca Kowalewicz, 2022, "Council Post: How Social Media Impacts Consumer Buying," Forbes, April 28, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2022/04/28/how-social-media-impacts-consumer-buying/?sh=614d63e7337d>.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Facebook IQ, 2019, "How Instagram Boosts Brands and Drives Sales," Facebook IQ, February 6, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/how-instagram-boosts-brands-and-drives-sales>.

The traditional theater-going experience is not conducive to social media. One of the special things about theater is that it requires the audience to take a step back from the screen and focus on the present. So, as an attraction, it is incredibly difficult to get images and portray the full experience online, making it less desirable when gathering ideas. So, the theater itself is not an Instagramable space. Allowing for differentiation from the show and initial entry, the design of the space will vary from a traditional theater due to the need for space to eat and will be more able to carry these Instagramable features.

The Instagramable features will come from the decor of the space. Mimicking design principles from Instagram museums, house lighting will be manufactured to be the best lighting in photos. Statement walls will be incorporated throughout the space, for example, a large bookshelf occupied by stylized copies of Jane Austen novels to highlight the beauty and importance of the novels to the theater. There will be a specific color scheme that is vibrant yet not overpowering. The furniture and table settings will emulate the regency style to further build immersion. Though one element of regency decor is focused on dark woods, opulence is the most important. Grand decorative chandeliers will hang above visitors' heads, furniture featuring intricate carvings will be featured in prime photo areas, and the tables will be set and decorated with china or china-style reproductions, and elaborate goblets to serve as water glasses. The VIP seats will feature luxurious regency-style chaises while other seats will feature smaller but still luxurious chairs.³² Everything will be curated to look good in person and in pictures and convey the taste of opulence that is a part of the Jane Austen Experience.

Social media has also been proven to benefit theatrical experiences that take advantage of what it has to offer. *Beetlejuice*, the Broadway musical, is a prime example of such. In 2019, the

³² Melissa Nicholson, 2022, "The Ultimate Guide to English Regency Decor," House Digest, June 13, 2022, <https://www.housedigest.com/894303/the-ultimate-guide-to-english-regency-decor/>.

show opened to mixed reviews and did not win a Tony. Revenue fell below the agreed amount with the Shubert Organization, who leased the Wintergarden theater to *Beetlejuice*, and thus they evoked a “stop clause” which allowed them to evict *Beetlejuice* to make way for another show.³³ That show was a revival of *The Music Man*. However, before the show left the theater, revenues began to increase. The new attention was not coming from critics, it was coming from young adults and teenagers on TikTok. With people cosplaying and lip-syncing to the songs, it went viral. It drew many first-time theatergoers out and had disproportionately young audiences compared to the average Broadway show with 70.79% of audience members between the ages of 19-54.³⁴ In 2019, the cast album was the most streamed of the Broadway season.³⁵ Audiences came to the theater in costume and strived to be a part of the community. It was fun and made young adults feel a little less alone. Despite this, *Beetlejuice* still lost its home. It was in the process of searching for a new theater that could fit its needs when Broadway shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the shutdown, *Beetlejuice* was able to find a new home at the Marquis theater and reopened in April 2022.³⁶ Without a strong social media presence and young audiences, *Beetlejuice* would have never been able to turn its profits around and find a second life on stage.

Building a strong community of followers online translates to building a strong customer base in person. By allowing fans to participate and engage with the material, a show can exceed expectations. Fun and exciting experiences are equally as important as high art in preserving

³³ Michael Paulson, 2019. “Despite Turnaround, ‘Beetlejuice’ Being Forced out of Theater.” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2019, sec. Theater. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/theater/beetlejuice-broadway-evicted.html>.

³⁴ E. J. Dickson, 2019, “Can Tiktok Save ‘Beetlejuice,’ the Broadway Musical?” *Rolling Stone*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/beetlejuice-broadway-musical-tiktok-trend-920184/>.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Sarah Bahr, 2021, “‘Beetlejuice’ Will Return to Broadway in April,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2021, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/13/theater/beetlejuice-broadway-return.html?searchResultPosition=8>.

theater. The key is to create something people can become both visually excited about to inspire social media posts also create a deeper connection to the content and community as well.

The Location

Finding the right location is key to any business. I chose to place The Jane Austen Experience in Washington DC for several reasons. Firstly, it is a major city, however, it has a limited number of theaters. This means there is room in the market for a new theatrical experience. Secondly, because it is in the District of Columbia, it is easily accessible to people in neighboring states like Maryland and Virginia to come for a unique night out. It allows for a wider audience than other cities may have. Additionally, there are several universities in the city that bring a large population of young adults, the target audience. It has a median age of 34 which is central in the demographic of millennials and gen z.³⁷ Finally, it is a major U.S. tourist destination. In 2019, Washington DC received over 23 million visitors.³⁸ This allows access to mass amounts of people who are seeking out leisure activities. Schools and history lovers frequently go to DC, making it a perfect audience for a Jane Austen-themed experience.

³⁷ World Population Review, n.d, "District of Columbia Population 2023 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)." Worldpopulationreview.com. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/states/district-of-columbia-population>.

³⁸ Washington DC Visitor Center, 2021, "Washington, DC Visitor Research | Washington DC," Washington.org, 2021, <https://washington.org/research/washington-dc-visitor-research>.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Business Plan

With ideas for the story, food, business model, decor, and location, it was important to create a business plan to test the viability of the concept. Additionally, it will act as a guide map for what needs to be done to build an operating dinner theater designed for a young adult audience.

The Jane Austen Experience Business Plan

Honors Thesis 2023

Presented To:

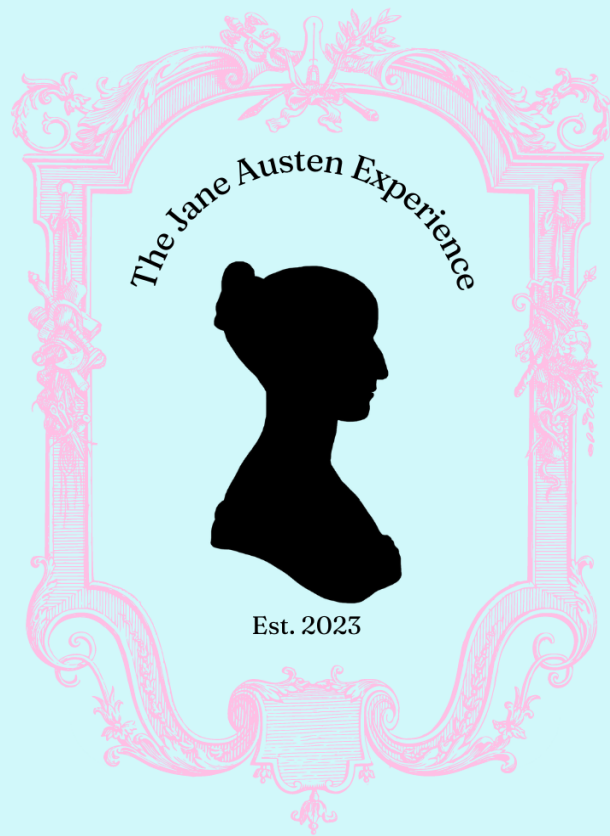
ARIEL FRISTOE

BRENT GLENN

MORGAN WARD

Presented By:

TESS ROSENTHAL



Executive Summary

The Jane Austen Experience offers an immersive entry into the beloved library of Jane Austen. It includes a show, food, drink, and photo opportunities. It is designed with a new generation of theatergoers in mind, however, like the works of Jane Austen, will still have universal, timeless appeal.

Located in Washington DC, the Jane Austen Experience is in the right place with a thriving population with a median age of 34 in the heart of Washington. Additionally, right now, DC has a growing population that would benefit from a unique theatrical experience designed for young people coming into the city and looking for fun nights out, especially for those looking outside of a traditional club scene.

Operating as a non-profit allows for the Jane Austen Experience to prioritize art and experience for the audience and make it a more accessible experience. It falls under the categorization of dinner theater which is a theatrical experience in which the audience enjoys food and/or beverages in a single environment with a practical price point. It is a subsection of the regional theater marketplace.

The tickets will be priced in tiers with regular tickets priced at 60 dollars, VIP tickets priced at 85 dollars, senior tickets priced at 55 dollars, and student tickets priced at 45 dollars. Schools will be able to commit to a field trip with a fee of 7 dollars per person. The regular experience which is included in all ticket levels is a three-course meal with one specialty drink and a ticket to the play. The VIP ticket will include early access to photo opportunities and an additional specialty drink.

The Jane Austen Experience is uniquely positioned in the industry as an immersive dinner show that specifically targets younger audiences. Additionally, it focuses on high-quality, fresh food that is not typically a focus for many dinner theaters. It serves a smaller crowd than the large arena shows like Medieval Times and is more immersive than dinner theaters like the Barn Theater.

The total costs of the Jane Austen Experience are expected to be \$2,409,467.64 with much of that coming from personnel. It has higher expenses than a non-dinner theater because of the expenses related to running food service. The total income is expected to be \$2,445,000.00 That leaves a net income of \$35,532.36

Industry Overview

Dinner theater is a theatrical experience in which the audience enjoys food and/or beverages in a single environment with a practical price point. It is a subsection of the regional theater marketplace.

Currently, the regional non-profit theater is struggling. Ticket sales and attendance have fallen significantly. Although much of the steep decline in attendance was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was still trending down prior to the pandemic. Attendance rates are slowly improving since the pandemic began, however, many people are not yet ready to come back to the theater, nor is it the most accessible form of entertainment.

The Jane Austen Experience seeks to appeal to a young adult audience in the dinner theater market. However, it will also serve a role as an educational institution, offering educational content for schools interested in seeing literature come to life.

Industry Finances:

The total average earned income for theaters in 2021 was \$1,001,996 according to The Theatre Communications Group in their 2021 Theater Facts report. Ticket Sales made up the largest percentage with the average revenue from ticket sales being \$155,888. These numbers were significantly higher in 2019 with nearly double the total income of 2021. The total ticket income in 2019 was \$1,818,050. The lack of ticket sales in 2021 is a result of the recovery from the pandemic, however, it will take time before theaters are able to reach 2019 levels once again.

Contributed income grew in 2021 from years past, totaling \$2,009,688, totaling \$1,915,027 in 2019. The support includes government, foundational, corporate, and individual support. The highest contribution came from individuals every year, with 2021 sitting at an average of \$538,661.

Considering both earned and contributed income combined, total income fell over the 5-year period by 25%. However, it supported 25% more of expenses as total expenses saw a correlating decline of 42%. In 2021, the average expenditures for theater companies were \$2,141,329. What this means is the average theater operated in the black. The total average CUNA for theater companies in 2021 was \$574,304, meaning that the average company had a net positive at the end of the fiscal year. In 2019, the average CUNA was \$93,006 which, although lower than in 2021, still means that on average theater companies were in the net positive.

Industry Players

Barn Dinner Theater

Barn dinner theater is a major player in the dinner theater industry. Located in North Carolina, it bills itself as America's longest-running dinner theater. As a traditional dinner theater, the show is typically a familiar musical or play. Dinner and the show are included in a ticket, however, drinks are available via a separate purchase.

Atlanta Shakespeare Tavern

Operating as a nonprofit, the Atlanta Shakespeare Tavern presents Shakespeare plays with the option to buy dinner and drinks separately. They also offer educational programming tied to the works they perform.

Fever Up Events

Fever provides two services. Firstly, it gives a place for different events to post what is taking place in a city. This is a great central platform for directing ticket sales. However, FeverUp frequently partners up with Netflix to create touring immersive attractions such as the Bridgerton experience. Each attraction stays in a city for a limited run, only about two or three months.

Medieval Times

A major player in the industry, Medieval Times has several locations across the U.S. Themed dinners are served to an arena-sized audience while a loose story takes place showcasing stunts like jousting and sword fights at a starting cost of \$65.95

Market Analysis

Target Age

The target market is young adults ages 20-35, however, the Jane Austen Experience will have a level of universal appeal due to the great value and timeless nature of its content. The Jane Austen Experience will serve as a fun and accessible entrance into art patronage to build a relationship with the up-and-coming arts audience.

Location

Geographically, DC's median age is 34, and it is projected to see a population increase in the coming years, thus making it a prime spot to appeal to this demographic. Of the 715,891 residents of DC, 575,926 residents are adults. These numbers are only for the District of Columbia, increasing with the regular commuters from Maryland and Virginia. Additionally, it was projected that 20 million tourists visit DC each year, opening another market of people who will be interested in unique experiences in the area. Finally, there are over 15 colleges in the DC area that host many members of the target demographic and could benefit from the educational value the experience holds. With the proposed space, about 50 people could be seated per performance with the ability to have several shows in a single night with additional sales made through extra food and beverage.

Local Competition

FeverUp Events: Fever provides two services. Firstly, it gives a place for different events to post what is taking place in a city. This is a great central platform for directing ticket sales.

However, FeverUp frequently partners up with Netflix to create touring immersive attractions such as the Bridgerton experience. Each attraction stays in a city for a limited run, only about two or three months.

Sax Dinner Theater and Lounge: Although a dinner theater, Sax Dinner Theater, and Lounge provide a nightclub environment with burlesque shows. The performance is not ticketed and they solely charge for food and drink.

Medieval Times Baltimore: Located in Baltimore, this attraction is about an hour away from Washington D.C. A major player in the industry, Medieval Times has several locations across the U.S. Themed dinners are served to an arena-sized audience while a loose story takes place showcasing stunts like jousting and sword fights at a starting cost of \$65.95.

Management Plan

The Jane Austen Experience will be located in the heart of Washington DC. It will be located in the former Uptown Theater, which will be converted into a live performance and dining space with room for 150 audience members/guests.

The Management Team

Executive Director - The Executive Director is a critical, full-time staff role that will lead the artistic and business aspects of the theater. Reporting to the Board of Directors, the Executive Director will be responsible for the administration and management of all business operations, finances, fundraising, marketing, and community engagement. This individual will manage all aspects of the theater. Annual Salary: \$79,000

Marketing Director The Marketing Director is a crucial, full-time staff role that will develop, implement and manage an effective marketing, fundraising, and public relations agenda and supporting programs for Jane Austen Experience. Annual Salary: \$75,000.

Development Director-The Development Director may be required to represent the Executive Director and the Jane Austen Experience, with respect to marketing and public relations issues to the City Commission, the City Manager, other governmental entities, current and prospective financial contributors, and/or the general public, as appropriate. Annual Salary: \$75,000.

Technical Director - The Technical Director is the primary leadership position for all aspects of technical production, planned maintenance, and operation of assigned performance venues and event areas. The Technical Director directs non-union technical staff to achieve the highest levels of production standards achieved through consistent feedback and skills development. The position works will o develop and execute strategic work plans for the department and drives recruitment and development to build and retain a skilled and flexible technical team. Annual Salary: \$74,000.

Operations and Facilities Director - The Operations and Facilities Director reports to the Director of Finance and Administration. They are responsible for overseeing and activating daily operations of the Theater's physical plant through management of the facilities and custodial departments, and front-of-house operations. Annual Salary: \$69,000.

Director of Finance - The Director of Finance will work closely with, and report to, the executive director, the Director of Finance is responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the financial operations of the Jane Austen Experience and preparing the annual budget. Additionally, the Director of Finance is a mid-level management position and handles all enrolling and maintaining of employees' insurance coverage. Salary: \$77,000

Head Chef: responsible for overseeing kitchen staff and ensuring the quality of food items. Their duties include hiring and training staff to cook their dishes, expediting orders to maintain a steady flow of dishes, and creating specialty dishes to add to the menu. Salary: \$72,000

Front of House and Bar Manager: The front of house and Bar manager is responsible for the overall operations of the front of house area of the restaurant, including the bar. They are in charge of hiring, training, and scheduling front-of-house staff. They are also responsible for maintaining the cleanliness and organization of the front-of-house area and ensuring that all front-of-house staff is providing excellent customer service. They must also maintain liquor licensing and ensure that staff is following local requirements and proper alcohol distribution regulations. The front-of-house manager works closely with the back-of-house manager to ensure that the restaurant is running smoothly and efficiently. Salary: \$52,000

Box Office Manager (Part-Time): responsible for overseeing all aspects of their theater's box office operations. They ensure that the box office is staffed with enough employees at all times to handle customer requests in a timely manner, and they may also be tasked with training new hires or evaluating current employees on an ongoing basis. Salary: \$612 per week

Products

The Jane Austen Experience will offer numerous ticket tiers

Ticket Tiers

Base Ticket: \$65

Includes access to a 90-minute performance, a three-course meal, and a specialty drink

Student Ticket: \$45

Proof of Valid Student ID is required. Includes access to a 90-minute performance, a three-course meal, and a specialty drink

Senior Ticket: \$55

Guests must be 65+.

Includes access to a 90-minute performance, a three-course meal, and a specialty drink

VIP Ticket: \$85

Includes early access to Instagram photo spots, a 90-minute performance, a three-course meal, and two specialty drinks

Field Trips: \$1000

Once a month, a field trip-only showing will be offered. Schools will be able to get the experience for 1000 dollars which will be around 7 dollars per person

Sample Menus

The Jane Austen Experience will offer a prefix menu with 2 choices per course as well as a limited drinks menu.



Marketing Plan

Overview

Selling Proposition

The Jane Austen Experience offers an immersive entry into the beloved library of Jane Austen. With included food, drink, and Instagram-able locations, the Jane Austen Experience makes a great date night, girls' night, and even mother, daughter night.

Target Audience

The target audience is millennials and Gen Z who are the generations that are most interested in engaging with the arts. However, the experience will also be marketed to schools as an educational experience highlighting classic literature and Jane Austen lovers of all ages.

Sales

The box office would be integrated into the website, providing easy access to purchases with the opportunity to buy tickets at the door on the day of the show.

Strategies

Social Media

Social Media is crucial to the success of the Jane Austen experience as it is the best way to target the young adult audience. Using a combination of Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, The Jane Austen Experience will have a number of active accounts. Instagram and TikTok will target millennials and gen z while Facebook will target gen x and baby boomers.

Instagram

Paid posts and stories will be the main form of promotion, with The Jane Austen Experience account hosting a visually appealing feed with content that reflects practical information as well as the photogenic nature of the experience.

TikTok

It is crucial to work with influencers. By working with DC area food and entertainment influencers, by either providing a complimentary ticket or sponsoring a post, information will be disseminated to people interested in the Washington DC area and its food and entertainment options.

Additionally, working with "BookTok" influencers, aka book reviewers and fans, will be the perfect way to reach bibliophiles who would love to step into a fictional world for an evening.

On the Jane Austen Experience account, original TikToks would serve to build a connection with the brand through character highlights, food and drink tutorials, and educational information about Jane Austen.

Facebook

Sponsored posts would highlight the informational and historical elements of the experience while highlighting how it can bridge gaps between generations. The Facebook page would primarily serve as a place to disseminate information in a simple way, as those who use Facebook are typically less tech-savvy than the millennials and the members of gen z who are on Instagram and TikTok.

Marketing Plan cont.

Print

Print Media is an important area of advertising. Home to more established critics, people trust what they see in large publications. Additionally, it is another way to disseminate information about the experience and get people thinking about it.

Critics and Reviews

Complimentary tickets will be given to critics in a variety of newspapers. The highest priority will be given to critics at major Washington DC publications like The Washington Post and the Washington Times.

Paid Ads

Ads will be taken out in local newspapers like the Washington Times. Additionally, Ads will be taken out in other theaters' programs to seek out existing theater supporters in the DC area.

Schools

The educational element of the experience is special and it is important to promote those values. Additionally, there will be a monthly field trip show which will be available at a discounted rate.

Outreach

Foster relationships with local private schools and public school boards to promote the educational benefits of attending live theater as well as enhance the reading experience and create a further connection with course material.

Auctions

School auctions are frequent fundraisers for schools and other community organizations. By donating a free set of tickets, we can get the word of our experience to a wider audience

Tourism

Because Washington DC is a major tourist destination, building relationships with hotels is crucial. Being a place that a concierge recommends is vital to success.

Hotels

Hotels would be given discount codes and/or a small commission when tickets would be bought through the concierge will encourage hotels to recommend the Jane Austen experience to the many visitors of DC. Putting brochures for the experience in hotel lobbies throughout the city would also build brand recognition.

Tourism Websites

Listing and promoting the experience on a variety of DC tourism websites like Washington.org and The District will highlight the experience in tourist google searches.

Fundraising Plan

Annual Fundraising Goal: \$390,000

Foundational Support - \$150,000

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Shubert Foundation | Amount: \$30,000 | Plan: The development director, with assistance from the executive director, will complete grant application and attend hearings following the Shubert Foundation's timeline |
| Mellon Foundation - Arts & Culture | Amount: \$25,000 | Plan: Development Director will write the grant and provide other necessary material, and submit it by the deadline. In addition, the development director will attend the panel reviews in the spring. |
| The Dallas Morse Coors Foundation for the Performing Arts | Amount: \$10,000 | Plan: Development Director will write the grant and provide other necessary material, and submit it by the deadline. In addition, the development director will attend the panel reviews in the spring. |
| The Morris and Gwendolyn Carfitz Foundation – Arts & Humanities Grants | Amount: \$45,000 | Plan: The development director, with assistance from the executive director, will complete the grant application and attend hearings following the foundation's timeline. |
| Events DC | Amount: \$15,000 | Plan: Development Director will write the grant and provide other necessary material, and submit it by the deadline. In addition, the development director will attend the panel reviews in the spring. |
| M&T Charitable Foundation | Amount: \$25,000 | Plan: Development Director will write the grant and provide other necessary material, and submit it by the deadline. In addition, the development director will attend the panel reviews in the spring. |

Governmental Support - \$20,000

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| DC Commission of Arts and Culture - General Operating Fund | Amount: \$10,000 | Plan: Development Director will write the grant and provide other necessary material, and submit it by the deadline. In addition, the development director will attend the panel reviews in the spring. |
| National Endowment for the Arts - Grant for Arts Project | Amount: \$10,000 | Plan: Development Director will write the grant and provide other necessary material, and submit it by the deadline. In addition, the development director will attend the panel reviews in the spring. |

Fundraising Plan

Sponsorships - \$45,000

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Marriott | Amount: \$15,000 | Plan: The development director will prepare and present various custom gift and sponsorship offerings for the potential donor corporation. They will then follow up with the corporate representative to ensure commitment. |
| AARP | Amount: \$15,000 | Plan: The development director will prepare and present various custom gift and sponsorship offerings for the potential donor corporation. They will then follow up with the corporate representative to ensure commitment. |
| Morgan Stanley Private Wealth Management | Amount: \$15,000 | Plan: The development director will prepare and present various custom gift and sponsorship offerings for the potential donor corporation. They will then follow up with the corporate representative to ensure commitment. |

Private Support - \$175,000

| | | |
|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Board of Directors | Amount: \$75,000 | Plan: Board President and Executive Director will distribute pledge forms in July and check in on pledge fulfillment at each board meeting. Final check-ins at the end of the season to confirm and explore future involvement and donations. |
| Individuals | Amount: \$100,000 | Plan: Development Director will write and send fundraising letters to 100 people in January, send an email inviting them to donate that February, meet with 5 top prospects in late February, and follow up with phone calls in March. In addition, several donor perks will be advertised for different levels of donations. These perks will range from priority seating to exclusive showings, and recognition opportunities. |

Fundraising Plan

Capital Campaign-1,200,000

| | | |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Board Members | Required \$15,000 donation | \$225,000 |
| Grants | The M.J. Murdock Foundation Capital Grant | \$75,000 |
| Individuals | BAR Family Foundation: \$275,000 Kaplan Family Foundation: \$200,000 Ressler Family Foundation: \$150,000 Beck Family Foundation: \$50,000 Joe and Alicia Russo: \$50,000 | \$725,000 |
| Corporate | AARP: \$50,000 Morgan Stanley: \$50,000 Marriott: \$75,000 | \$175,000 |

Financial Plan

Projected Balance Sheet

| ASSETS | |
|------------------------|----------------|
| Cash & Equivalents | \$10,000.00 |
| Accounts Receivable | 2,445,000.00 |
| Inventory | 40,000.00 |
| Property and Equipment | 733,000.00 |
| Other Assets | 1,950.00 |
| Total Assets | \$3,229,950.00 |
| LIABILITIES AND EQUITY | |
| Notes Payable | \$2,308,297.64 |
| Accounts Payable | 17,520.00 |
| Total Liabilities | 2,325,817.64 |
| Retained Earnings | 904,132.36 |
| Total Liab. & Equity | \$3,229,950.00 |

Financial Plan

Capital Campaign Expenses

| EXPENSES | AMOUNT |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Personel | |
| Designers | \$9,000.00 |
| Director | \$8,000.00 |
| Facilities Manager | \$5,750.00 |
| Playwright | \$10,000.00 |
| Head Chef | \$5,417.00 |
| Builders | \$40,800.00 |
| Actors | \$183,600.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$262,567.00 |
| Remaining Operating Expenses - Supplies | |
| Set | \$150,000.00 |
| Costumes | \$10,000.00 |
| Props | \$5,000.00 |
| Lights and Sound | \$10,000.00 |
| Stage Management Supply | \$1,000.00 |
| Office Supplies | \$2,000.00 |
| Tableware | \$5,000.00 |
| Kitchen Supplies | \$550,000.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$733,000.00 |
| Remaining Operating Expenses - Utilities | |
| Electricity | \$4,600.00 |
| Water | \$500.00 |
| Phone/Internet Bundle | \$80.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$5,180.00 |
| Remaining Operating Expenses – Lounge/Bar | |
| Soft Drinks | \$10,000.00 |
| Food | \$30,000.00 |
| Alcoholic Beverages | \$40,000.00 |
| Liquor Liscence | \$1,950.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$81,950.00 |
| Remaining Operating Expenses - Other | |
| Accounting Fees | \$5,000.00 |
| Software | \$18,000.00 |
| Insurance | \$4,090.00 |
| Licenses & Permits | \$500.00 |
| Rent | \$87,713.00 |
| Printing/Postage | \$100.00 |
| Web/Domain | \$58.00 |
| Bank Fees | \$30.00 |
| Donor Cultivation/Hospitality | \$200.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$115,491.00 |
| Total Expenses | \$1,198,188.00 |

Financial Plan

Projected Expense Statement

| EXPENSES | |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Personnel - Administrative | |
| Executive Director | \$79,000.00 |
| Marketing Director | \$75,000.00 |
| Development Director | \$75,000.00 |
| Director of Finance | \$77,000.00 |
| Technical Director | \$74,000.00 |
| Facilities and Operations Manager | \$69,000.00 |
| Front of House and Bar Manager | \$52,000.00 |
| Head Chef | \$65,000.00 |
| Box Office Manager | \$17,680.00 |
| Personnel - Artistic | |
| Actors (12) | \$581,861.00 |
| Stage Manager | \$31,824.00 |
| Technicians (5) | \$95,472.00 |
| Director | \$2,000.00 |
| Personnel - Food Service | |
| Waitstaff/Ushers (5) | \$159,120.00 |
| Bartenders (5) | \$31,824.00 |
| Line Cooks (5) | \$159,120.00 |
| Personnel - other | |
| Design Maintenance | \$6,000.00 |
| Cleaning Staff | \$21,216.00 |
| Pre-Tax Total | \$1,472,117.00 |
| Payroll Tax | \$112,616.95 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$1,584,733.95 |
| Facilities | |
| Space Rental | \$526,279.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$526,279.00 |
| Marketing/Promotion | |
| Social Media Advertising | \$100,000.00 |
| Print Advertising | \$35,000.00 |
| Graphics/ Design | \$200.00 |
| Photography/Filming | \$800.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$136,000.00 |
| Remaining Operating Expenses - Supplies | |
| Set | \$5,000.00 |
| Costumes (includ. cleaning) | \$17,020.00 |
| Props | \$2,000.00 |
| Lights and Sound | \$5,000.00 |
| Stage Management Supply | \$500.00 |
| Office Supplies | \$1,000.00 |
| Tableware | \$2,000.00 |
| Kitchen Supplies | \$5,000.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$37,520.00 |
| Remaining Operating Expenses - Utilities | |
| Electricity | \$28,507.29 |
| Water | \$1,585.40 |
| Phone/Internet Bundle | \$480.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$30,570.69 |
| Remaining Operating Expenses – Lounge/Bar | |
| Soft Drinks | \$5,000.00 |
| Food | \$25,000.00 |
| Alcoholic Beverages | \$10,000.00 |
| Liquor License | \$1,950.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$41,950.00 |
| Remaining Operating Expenses - Other | |
| Accounting Fees | \$5,000.00 |
| Software | \$18,000.00 |
| Credit Card Fees | \$0.00 |
| Dues & Subscriptions | \$3,000.00 |
| Insurance | \$4,090.00 |
| Licenses & Permits | \$300.00 |
| Professional Development | \$500.00 |
| Staff Development | \$500.00 |
| Printing/Postage | \$500.00 |
| Web/Domain | \$324.00 |
| Bank Fees | \$180.00 |
| Donor Cultivation/Hospitality | \$2,500.00 |
| Playwright Royalties | \$17,520.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$52,414.00 |
| TOTAL EXPENSES | \$2,409,467.64 |

Financial Plan

Projected Income Statement

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Revenue - Admissions | |
| Ticket Sales (General) | \$900,000.00 |
| Ticket Sales (Student) | \$337,500.00 |
| Ticket Sales (Senior) | \$247,500.00 |
| Ticket Sales (Field Trip) | \$12,000.00 |
| Ticket Sales (VIP) | \$255,000.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$1,752,000.00 |
| Revenue – Concessions (Additional) | |
| Food | \$120,000.00 |
| Drink | \$171,000.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$291,000.00 |
| Support – Corporate | |
| Corporate Donations | \$45,000.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$45,000.00 |
| Support – Foundations | |
| The Shubert Organization | \$30,000.00 |
| The Morris and Gwendolyn Carfitz Foundation | \$45,000.00 |
| Mellon Foundation | \$25,000.00 |
| The Dallas Morse Coors Foundation for the Performing Arts | \$10,000.00 |
| Events DC | \$15,000.00 |
| M&T Charitable Foundation | \$25,000.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$150,000.00 |
| Support – Private | |
| Board of Directors | \$75,000.00 |
| Individual | \$100,000.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$175,000.00 |
| Support – Government | |
| State (DC commission for arts and humanities) | \$10,000.00 |
| Federal (NEA) | \$10,000.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$20,000.00 |
| Other | |
| Venue Rentals | \$12,000.00 |
| SUBTOTAL | \$12,000.00 |
| TOTAL INCOME | \$2,445,000.00 |
| NET INCOME | \$55,532.36 |

CONCLUSION

Through completing the business plan, I have concluded that the modernized dinner theater is a viable alternative to other offerings. However, like most businesses, it will not be without its challenges. Both restaurants and theaters suffer from cost disease. There are very few ways to improve efficiency and output for the cost of labor. It is a human-driven industry. It is one of the things that makes art feel like art. Additionally, with the addition of the meal, there are inherently more labor and supply costs than in the traditional forms of theater. To keep ticket prices at an affordable rate, it will rely on the generosity of donors and grantmaking. The budget will be tight, but I believe there is room for growth in the industry. I found myself struggling the most with financials because the business is purely hypothetical. It is hard to quantify what will be needed for an unwritten play. Serving as an executive director, financial manager, marketing director, development director, and every other role in this position has highlighted the need for incredible talent to take on a project of this size.

The history of dinner theater in America is short, still, it takes on many forms. Traditional dinner theaters serve their role in the theatrical marketplace; however, it is not tailored to the experiences that young adults are seeking and thus isolate a large part of the market. It is important to remember that cost-effective experiences can still be high quality with the right ideas and strategies. Utilizing the power of the food and theater connection to the highest degree is a crucial piece of the puzzle. I can only hope my exploration of the topic opens the possibility for more creativity within the dinner theater space.

It should be no secret that I am fascinated with the intersection of food, theater, and theme. This project was undoubtedly filled with passion. That passion is needed to drive an organization of this size. Especially, when without passion, the project serves as nothing but a

misguided cash grab. Experiences like the Jane Austen Experience will never replace traditional theater as it serves a different role. However, aside from serving a purely recreational purpose, it can get new audiences excited about theater and all the different forms it takes.

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