

# A History of The Phoenix Theatre Company Sets the Stage for Success

By Shelina Elyse

As the oldest arts organization in Arizona, The Phoenix Theatre Company is no stranger to growth, innovation, and community.



(Downtown Phoenix in the 1920s)

The humble Phoenix Players troupe was originally founded in 1920 and performed in a variety of spaces around Phoenix. Inspired by the National Little Theatre Movement that challenged commercial Broadway productions, they rebranded as the Phoenix Little Theatre in 1922 and hoped to encourage artistic exploration through intimate, experimental work. The next step was to find a dedicated venue.

Maie Bartlett Heard and Dwight B. Heard generously offered their old coach house on the corner of Central and McDowell for the Phoenix Little Theatre's permanent residence in 1924. The original space, dubbed "The Old Carriage House," seated around 167 patrons. A stage was added as well as a small box office and lobby. The stable doors were colorfully decorated with ships and palm trees. The seating of backless, wooden benches perched on a slope, the haylofts served as dressing rooms, and the lighting was primitive. However, none of this could diminish the magic of live theatre!



(Close up of coach house exterior)



(Cast of *Dark Tower*, 1937)



(Cast of *Harvey*. The last show in the "The Old Carriage House," 1951)

The 1950s laid the groundwork for the Phoenix Little Theatre's future. Board President Stephen Shadegg, the Heard Family, and Barry Goldwater won funding in 1952 to construct a new building to house the theatre.

In 1954, Donald Doyle revived youth theatre in Phoenix with Theatre for Young Audiences and its first production *The Wickedest Witch*.

The company produced its first-ever full-length musical, *Lady in the Dark*, in 1955. It was such a huge success it became the first show to be held over due to demand. The First Nighters Club, a volunteer group, was established the same year. They provided significant support hosting theatre events, recruiting and training ushers, helping with administrative tasks, and working backstage!

The iconic Phoenix Little Theatre sign debuted on Central Avenue in 1957!

Eventually, the Phoenix Art Museum and Phoenix Library joined the theatre to create a cultural hub. Many of the theatre programs developed during this time still exist connecting the community to performing art.

In 1993, the Phoenix Little Theatre was renamed to what you've come to know and love - The Phoenix Theatre Company.



(Iconic Phoenix Little Theatre sign, 1957)



(Administrative offices expansion, 2006-2013)



(Lobby and bistro expansion, 2006-2013)

With the continued growth in popularity and offerings, The Phoenix Theatre Company expanded significantly in 2013 to meet program needs and provide an elevated patron experience. Additional rehearsal spaces, a new black box theatre, and modern glass lobby revitalized the theatre for staff, artists, and patrons alike.



(Digital rendering of the exterior of the Dr. Stacie J. and Richard J Stephenson Theatre)

Uplifting the mission, The Phoenix Theatre Company prepares to reveal the greatest expansion yet to create exceptional theatrical experiences! The long-awaited opening of the state-of-the-art 500-seat Dr. Stacie J. and Richard J Stephenson Theatre is the next step in the evolution of Arizona's largest producing regional theatre. Not only will the new space allow for larger-scale and more technically advanced productions, but it opens the company to establish a consistent pre-Broadway show development program and increase contribution to the local economy through cultural tourism.

The end of major construction is near with enclosed walls being erected. Next is installing electrical, internal build out, and finishing touches. The new theatre is set to open in late Summer of 2025 with an exciting production yet to be announced.

History shows none of this would've been possible without the support of the community every step of the way. From a donated coach house to volunteers helping backstage to advocates supporting the cause, The Phoenix Theatre Company was built by the people. "The Phoenix Theatre Company believes the arts are essential because they foster the hero within, create greater understanding of cultural and political differences... [to] continue to provide a place where the community – from all walks of life – can gather, live and in-person." We can't wait to share this next momentous step of the journey with you!