



A THEATRE IN THE CITY

By David Schweidt



The corner of 16th Avenue and Van Buren is home to a collection of four very different types of buildings, on one corner, a government building, on another corner, an elementary school, and the other two corners have small businesses. Within this small cluster of old businesses, that require upkeep, there is a small building with a sign that says “The Academy Theatre”.

The outer shell of the building looks anything like a theatre. It’s a small building, coated in an old white paint, and completely gated around to keep people from loitering and the only existing hints that sets the building apart from anything else on this corner is the sign, and a large mural on the wall facing the street. While all of these factors make it seem like a playhouse could never

exist here, The Academy Theatre defies expectations and exists. While the outside is harsh and gritty due to the surrounding area, the inside has a completely different feeling. While pictures can show the lighting and what’s inside, it is difficult to describe the tone, and how the harsh outside area is contrasted by the warm, inviting, and cozy atmosphere that is inside the theatre. This deep contrast is met with several questions about the theatre’s history, and how it became the way that it is today.

While the theatre has found its home in central Phoenix, it started in the backyard of the directors’ house back in 2007. Back in 2007, a man named Angel Arredondo decided to create a program for teenage boys that were not interested in sports, and could learn the finer arts without fear of stereotyping or bullying.





Mr. Arredondo was inspired to do this for his son, he explains, "I saw myself in my son, and I wanted to develop a program that I would have wanted" (Arredondo). He was empowered by this ambition to create this and set up a tent in his backyard; it wasn't much, but it was a start for him. "Six boys, a ten-by-twenty-foot tent, and ready to conquer the world... That is where it all started: in the backyard of the wife and director-boss. No microphones, no curtains, no props... yet; just nature's warm Arizonan evenings, glittered with stars" (Arredondo). From there, Mr. Arredondo directed the first members of The Academy Theatre, his son Dylan, and 5 of his friends. Once a week, they met to work on plays in the evening, and eventually put them on to show their parents, with everyone crammed in this 10 by 20 foot tent. While this was a start, there were bigger plans that Mr. Arredondo had in mind for The Academy Theatre.





The Theatre eventually began moving, first to a small building that used to be a liquor store, then eventually to its present location. Everything built upon itself, and somehow, a tent in a backyard, eventually became a thriving building in an unexpected location, and the substantial drive that is pushing Angel Arredondo to continue this work as the director and administrator of The Academy Theatre today. Mr. Arredondo is no longer working alone though. Now he has an entire board of officers that help him run this program. The most unique thing about this program though, is that every board member, every worker, and even Mr. Arredondo himself, is doing this completely as volunteer work. It is commendable that since the inception of the Academy Theatre, all staff and administration including the founder and Executive Director are unpaid volunteers.

This means that even after all of these years of working at building up The Academy Theatre, it's no more than a passion project for Mr. Arredondo. When I had the opportunity to speak with him, he explained to me that between work that was required at the theatre, rehearsals, set up, set design, other important paperwork, he spends around 13 hours a week in the theatre, 4 days a week. But while some board members start and finish their work there, Mr. Arredondo has to bring his work back home with him. Between searching for scripts and networking with other companies, he spends around 60 hours a week on theatre related business, all of this on top of his regular day job. Every penny brought into the theatre goes directly to keeping the building, normal business expenses, buying props for shows, and paying royalties for scripts.

The financial decision of not charging enrollment fees is a very conscious decision, as Mr. Arredondo wanted to keep in mind the philosophy of giving every child an opportunity to do something like this, requiring no tuition, just a flat fee of \$5 a meeting. When speaking with him, Mr. Arredondo was very passionate about this situation. He said that he never wanted to make a kid feel left out because they couldn't afford to do something they wanted to do or were passionate about. He brought up how so many people are limited in what they can do and partake in because money is too big of an issue, and it seems the rest of the board, willing to spend all of this time volunteering, agree with him.

Angel Arredondo's work has not stopped there, with him still standing strong with him as director, and his board of officers supporting him. Today he continues to run The Academy Theatre as an act of volunteerism, with the mission of spreading awareness to not only the theatre, but the community as well. One of the main missions that he has is to work with the community in central phoenix and show that the Van Buren today, is not the same that it was 20 years ago. One of the big events that is thrown nearly every year is a community festival on the anniversary of The Academy Theatre's inception. The festival is aimed at bringing the community together, by having different vendors and musicians play at the festival, companies, and people from all over Phoenix can come together and have fun.

The theatre has many different shows as well, varying from screenings of movies, to plays and vocal shows put on by the different academies, to live music, and bingo are just some of the many activities that they have. Many of which are free and open to the public. Of course, The Academy Theatre's main functions serves as a community playhouse, with normal people as the actors, being a place where people can enroll and act as well, which means that nearly anyone can get involved and enroll into the respective academy.

Students within The Academy Theatre are given deep responsibility. They are expected and required to memorize scripts, songs, and show up to the meeting of their respective academy every week. Every week they have meetings, they are expected to bring \$5 to pay for dues, and they hold a professional and private court, only allowing the respective members of that academy in. Within the meeting officers take attendance, due collection, schedule volunteer work, and manage internal business like votes, and important information on upcoming shows. These court meetings are completely student-led by the elected president and vice president of that group. A student's job does not stop after meetings though, as they are required to meet volunteer hours within the theatre. These are met by going to different events and doing work like helping people with where to go, ushering people, sending information from person to person, or general work like set-up and take-down. This work gives students an opportunity to practice real world responsibilities and experiences, preparing students for real life. The sentiment is reinforced by students as well, finding it as a good experience. When interviewed by Sonoran Living, students talked about how they had responsibilities, but enjoyed it because of the people and atmosphere. Shayla Arredondo had this to say about the theatre, "It's the people. Having a bond with everyone keeps me wanting to go back, as well as the productions and my connection with it." (Arredondo, Shayla).



A T H E A T R E I N T H E C I T Y



The Academy Theatre is a place with an unlikely location. In the middle of Central Phoenix, next to government buildings and poor neighborhoods, a small community theatre thrives, aiming towards allowing any child who wants to learn theatre, to go there and learn. It is a warm environment, aiming at not profit, but enrichment of students' lives. People can go there and be welcomed by smiling faces, ready to help and entertain you. This theatre in the city that is hidden by the cold and harsh landscape of government buildings, old business buildings, and the art district, somehow exists after years of operation, and still works to serve the community to the best of its ability.

Works cited

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