



BETTER *by* DEGREES

BY LISA WHITE

DIVERSE PROGRAMMING, CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY
PUSH UNIVERSITY VENUES TO STRONG YEAR

THE LINE BETWEEN university and non-university venues barely exists these days. Both hold similar events, draw diverse audiences and provide experiences enhanced with updated technology and facility upgrades.

And despite their own set of challenges, university venues are positioned to continue thriving in the year ahead, thanks to eclectic programming that ranges from top musical performers to family entertainment and sporting events as well as lectures and presentations.

One example is Stephens Auditorium at Iowa State University in Ames — a city of almost 70,000 about 30 miles north of Des Moines — which had a stellar 2018.

“We had an 8 percent increase in subscribing households, a 20 percent increase in tickets purchased by subscribers and a 48 percent increase in gross ticket sales accrued from our subscriber base,” said Tammy Koolbeck, the auditorium’s executive director.

In 2018, the venue hosted 26 shows, 14 of them as part of its Performing Arts Series. “In a 10-day period in October and November, we hosted Ray LaMontagne, Jo Koy and the Swedish band Ghost,” she said. Through its University Lecture series, the auditorium hosted Me Too movement founder Tarana Burke, Elizabeth Smart and “Black Panther” costume designer Ruth Carter.

Highlights included a sold out Ringo Starr & His All-Starr Band in September and full houses for Tedeschi Trucks Band in January, Steve Martin/Martin Short in September and Home Free in December.

2018 HIGHLIGHTS

Iowa State’s success is not unique to venues in traditional college towns. A big-city case in point: Boston University’s Agganis Arena also had a banner year, thanks to Feld Entertainment, Live Nation, Cardenas Marketing Network and AEG Live/Bowery Presents.

“Last year was incredible for us,” General Manager Kristoffer Brassil said. “In addition to longtime family show partners Feld Entertainment, who bring us Disney on Ice, Sesame Street Live and Cirque Du Soleil, we had a very strong concert year with the return of Jeff Dunham and Andre Rieu. Our big project last year was a full upgrade of our center-hung videoboard and replacement our LED video ribbons.”

The year also was marked by milestone anniversaries, including Stephens Auditorium’s 50th at Iowa State. To celebrate, patrons and students were asked to share their experiences at the venue either via email or on the auditorium’s website. Winners were featured on the school’s anniversary website.

Celebrating its 40th anniversary, the University of Texas’ Frank Erwin Center in Austin celebrated with a George Strait concert June 3. “We also welcomed back the Trans-Siberian Orchestra for the first time since 2015, which sold out and ended our 2018 on a high note,” said Liz Land, the arena’s associate director.

In addition, the building had a change in leadership: In September, Jimmy Earl became only the third director to manage the facility. A farewell celebration may also be on the horizon for the building after regents announced plans to build a new arena on campus.

The University of Kansas’ Lied Center in Lawrence celebrated its 25th anniversary during its 2018-19 season.

“As part of our anniversary celebration, we were able to raise the necessary funds to install a hearing loop in our auditorium and pavilion,” said Derek Kwan, the center’s executive director. “The Lawrence Otolaryngology Hearing Loop allows individuals with telecoil enabled hearing aids to experience a performance or lecture with high-quality audio.”

Recent Lied Center performances included Trevor Noah,

COURTESY AGGANIS ARENA



AGGANIS ARENA
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
John Hancock
STUDENT VILLAGE

Boston's Agganis Arena had a strong concert year mixing up-and-coming acts and established artists.

Steve Martin and Martin Short, Joshua Bell, a site-specific spectacle created by Quixotic and the world premiere of the “Rock Chalk Suite.”

“With basketball like a religion at the university, we commissioned the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis to create a new work celebrating 15 KU basketball legends,” Kwan said. “Each member of the orchestra composed a movement that embodied the spirit of a KU legend.”

In addition to serving as the home of Atlantic Coast Conference men’s basketball champions the Virginia Cavaliers, the University of Virginia’s John Paul Jones Arena in Charlottesville hosted major artists including Luke Bryan, Jimmy Buffett, Pink, Keith Urban, Chris Stapleton and the hometown Dave Matthews Band, who played two nights.

“The arena also launched #JPJAM last year,” said Jason Pedone, the arena’s general manager. The Twitter feed, created in-house, highlights “JAMs” from both Virginia basketball and the arena’s musical performers.

Ranked as one of the top 100 theater venues for worldwide ticket sales by *Pollstar*, Velma V. Morrison Center at Boise State University was recently cited by the city of Boise as its cultural ambassador for a two-year term.

The biggest highlight of the past year has been the performing arts center’s record-breaking Broadway production of Disney’s “The Lion King.”

“The show played for 24 performances, grossed over \$3.7 million and played to more than 44,500 patrons,” said James Patrick, the executive director. “The production generated an estimated \$12 million to the local economy.”

Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s *On the Run II* tour wasn’t the only popular show at the University of South Carolina’s Colonial Life Arena. The Eagles, Imagine Dragons, Chris Stapleton, Journey and Def Leppard also drew big crowds.

“We’ve had great shows over the last three to four years and are constantly improving on gross sales,” General Manager Sid Kenyon said. “We’ve beaten several records during this period.”

The success of both the men’s and women’s basketball teams also has helped build momentum for the venue.

Its recent improvements include new digital displays and trophy cases, in addition to upgraded seats.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

For Chicago’s DePaul University, 2018 marked the first full year for Wintrust Arena, an off-campus facility that opened in fall 2017. Connected to McCormick Place, North America’s largest convention center, the arena has 10,000 seats and 22 suites. It was created through a public-private partnership between the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority and DePaul University along with the naming-rights sponsorship from Wintrust Financial.

“The arena has been a game changer for the South Loop community and neighborhood, with two hotels and several restaurants opening up,” said David Kennedy, the arena’s general manager/entertainment.



In the short time it has been open, the facility has hosted President Barack Obama, Gloria Estefan, Chance the Rapper, Keith Urban, Bob Dylan, Mavis Staples and REO Speedwagon, among others.

Another notable development in the university venue space was the naming-rights deal with brewer D.G. Yuengling & Son that changed the name of the arena at the University of South Florida in Tampa from the USF Sun Dome to the Yuengling Center. The facility also added a beer garden on site.

“We’ve enhanced the event mix and the diversity of events coming to the area, including our mentionable sell-outs like Martin Lawrence, Chris Tomlin and Underoath,” said Kelli Yeloushan, director of event management for Tampa Bay Entertainment Properties, which operates the arena. “We also started a student ticket pricing program for events. Being able to combine resources of Amalie Arena and Yuengling Center has changed the way we can create market impressions, cross marketing at both arenas, uses of databases and more.”

In terms of marketing, Iowa State’s Stephens Auditorium focused on its core audience.

“It’s all about data — targeted e-blasts to look-alike ticket buyers and marketing to ticket buyers that have a higher propensity to purchase at a specific time in the sales cycle,” Koolbeck said. “And at the end of the day, it’s really about programming what people want to see.”

Boise State emphasizes the Morrison Center’s flexible seating configurations, venue location, a state-of-the-art d&b line array, full fly system, affordable rental rates, marketing support and talented staff in its marketing plan.

Boise’s growth has helped boost sales, Patrick said. “The center now reaches over 160,000 patrons annually. With the growth of our market and successful shows, the center is able to expand its Broadway offerings, including both the number of performances as well as show selection,” he said.

Accessibility for the disabled was a focus at both the University of Virginia’s JPJ and Iowa State’s Stephens Auditorium, both of which undertook accessibility projects this past year.

“We tripled the number of available accessible seats by

Colonial Life Arena in Columbia, S.C., will be hosting the first two rounds of the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament.



expanding two sections and creating a new section closer to the stage,” says Koolbeck at Iowa State. The venue also added handrails in the balconies and loge boxes.

PLANS FOR 2019

With 2019 underway, university venues are preparing for a busy and profitable year.

“We’ve got a few sellouts already on the books, including Why Don’t We, the 1975, and JoJo Siwa, plus the return of Sesame Street Live and a two-week run of Cirque Du Soleil’s ‘Corteo’ in June,” said Brassil at Agganis Arena in Boston. “Our fall concert holds are starting to take shape with what should be a great combination of up-and-coming acts making the leap from

theaters to some of those previously mentioned artists who manage to sell out this arena annually.”

JPJ’s spring lineup includes Panic! at the Disco, Luke Combs, Mumford and Sons, “Jersey Boys,” Jeff Dunham, Alabama and Twenty-One Pilots.

Stephens Auditorium has created the Goldfinch Room, a listening room with cabaret seating for 80 to 90 people.

“We will be featuring songwriter showcases focusing on Iowa songwriters this first year,” Koolbeck said. “Opening night Jan. 26 featured Iowa songwriters and artists Chad Elliott and Patresa Hartman with special guest Tommy Lewis from Texas. We sold out of 18 tables in under a week using social media and a press release.”

Boise State’s Morrison Center anticipates increased patronage and facility usage, as well as improved routing and expanded Broadway offerings this year.

“We will also continue to expand our outreach efforts to provide free or affordable programming,” Patrick said. “For example, in 2016 over 30,000 patrons attended free events at the Morrison Center.”

This year, Erwin Center is going into its fifth year as the host venue of the iHeartCountry Festival.

“We anticipate another robust year with major touring acts and athletic events,” Land said

DePaul’s Wintrust Arena will be hosting the NCAA Women’s Basketball Tournament regional at the end of March, with the winner headed to the Final Four.

In addition to Elton John, Pink and Fleetwood Mac shows, Colonial Life Arena in South Carolina will be hosting the first two rounds of the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament.

“What’s unique to us is that four members of Hootie and the Blowfish are our alumni, so when they announced their tour, we were able to book two of their many sold-out shows,” Kenyon said. 

Bernie Punt retired from Bryce Jordan Center on Jan. 18 after a 23-year career at the arena.



‘WHAT WOULD BERNIE DO?’

BERNIE PUNT’S ENERGY is infectious.

“He always has a smile on his face and he really enjoys what he does,” said Jade Ludlow, a former intern of Punt’s at the Bryce Jordan Center, Penn State’s multipurpose arena, who has gone on to a career in live entertainment.

Punt had worked at the arena since it opened in 1996 before he retired last month. He has become a legend in the arena business, said his longtime friend Jim Delaney, CEO and president of Activate Sports & Entertainment.

“We were first-time attendees together at an Event & Arena Marketing Conference 20-plus years ago, and you could tell even then that there was just something very special about this small-market guy with the infectious personality, crazy hair and incredible passion and creativity,” Delaney said in an email.

Punt feels incredibly grateful that he had a 23-year career at the venue, an occupation he found by default. Before working at Penn State, Punt owned a family entertainment facility called Go Bonkerz.

“I eventually sold my share of (Bonkerz),” Punt said, noting that he never looked back.

As time went on at the arena, Punt started teaching the class Introduction to Arena Management. He also ran the internship program at the arena, which is where he met Ludlow.

“Bernie was one of the most influential people in my career,” she said. “He gave me a chance when I was 19 years old when I had no experience. He really set his interns up for success. He really gave you the opportunity to grow as a professional and he empowered you to make your own decisions.”

Ludlow graduated from Penn State in 2013 and is now tour marketing manager at Vector Management in Nashville. “I took whatever I learned from him, and I’ve used that in my career,” she said. “I think Bernie is innovative. He’s bold. His ideas are brilliant. He’s not afraid to take risks. He pushes boundaries and does it while having the time of his life.”

In his time at the arena, Punt also booked acts and often reminisces about hanging out with Billy Joel, Willie Nelson and other artists.

“There is no replacing him, but thankfully his impact on the industry doesn’t end just because he’s left day-to-day arena life,” Delaney said. “It carries on through all of those he has taught and mentored along the way at PSU and far beyond Happy Valley. What greater legacy than to have event marketers across the country sitting in their venues trying to spark new creative ideas or promotions and thinking to themselves, ‘OK, that’s good, but what would Bernie do?’”

— Noelle Riley