



Miller Outdoor Theatre's July 4th celebration includes fireworks and a symphony performance that draw thousands to the theatre. After a three-year hiatus due to the COVID pandemic, the tradition will resume in 2023.

All photos courtesy of Miller Outdoor Theatre unless otherwise noted.

Making Memories at Miller Outdoor Theatre: A CENTENNIAL OF ARTS

By Samantha de León

In February 1969, forty-six years after Miller Outdoor Theatre opened and a year after moving into its new facility, *Houston Chronicle* fine arts editor Ann Holmes questioned what was next for the outdoor amphitheater. Nestled in the heart of the museum district in Hermann Park, Miller Outdoor Theatre's future was in question due to limited funding and big ambitions to expand its programming. "What will happen when summer comes? Will Miller Theatre go dark many nights – the stage curtain down like some great slumberous eye, unresponsive of light and entertainment?" Holmes wondered.¹

Over fifty years later, as the theatre celebrates its centennial birthday, Miller has surpassed expectations, and certainly Holmes's questioning. It has cemented itself as an arts powerhouse, operating eight months out of the year with a variety of shows: Shakespeare, jazz, ballet, symphonies,

plays, musicals, and cultural performances. While Miller has endured tough times and changed throughout the years, with different names and new construction, what has not changed is the theatre's distinctiveness, programming, variety, and production quality, all provided to audiences free of charge. The experiences and memories made by guests of all ages demonstrate the magic Miller Outdoor Theatre has created across generations, making it a favorite of Houstonians and visitors from near and far. The hard work and dedication to Miller's mission of making theatre accessible and available to everyone has made it a Houston treasure and a pillar of excellence in performance.

Originally known as Miller Memorial Theatre, the facility began as an amphitheater featuring twenty Corinthian-style, Bedford limestone columns, designed by William Ward Watkin in 1922, and constructed by Tom Tellepsen, a



Big Bird performs with the Houston Symphony Orchestra in front of a capacity crowd at Miller Outdoor Theatre on July 21, 1979. Big Bird served as guest conductor, sang, and danced to music from Sesame Street.⁵

founder of Houston's Tellepsen Builders. Reminiscing about this theatre he knew as a boy, Jim Bernhard, a former Miller advisory board member, Rice University professor, and producer, actor, and writer for Theatre Under The Stars (TUTS), recalled, "It was really more of a bandshell. It was not a fully equipped theatre."²

Miller Outdoor Theatre was dedicated on May 12, 1923, with a plaque that read, "To the Arts of Music, Poetry, Drama, and Oratory, by which the striving spirit of man seeks to interpret the words of God. This theatre of the City of Houston is permanently dedicated." The ceremonies included a pageant, *The Springtime of Our Nation*, described as Houston's most "elaborate and pretentious festival ever presented" at the time, which featured approximately 2,500 performers and focused on the United States and Manifest Destiny.³ The theatre officially opened six days later, on May 18, 1923, to *The Rose Maiden*, a cantata by English composer Frederic Cowen. W. R. Waghorne, musical director of the Recreation and Community Service Association, directed the performance by the Houston Festival Chorus.⁴

In the 1920s, sports like boxing and baseball reigned supreme across the country. Miller hosted broadcasting events, such as the 1925 World Series match between the Washington Senators (now the Minnesota Twins) and the Pittsburgh Pirates who went head-to-head in a thrilling seven games. On September 22, 1927, thousands gathered again at Miller to hear the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney to experience the momentous match as it happened. Similar

broadcasts occurred in New York City, Boston, Washington, D.C., and other U.S. cities.⁶

In addition to radio broadcasts, the theatre was used for parades, celebrations, rallies, plays, memorials, concerts, and graduations. For example, The University of Houston held its first commencement as a university there in 1935.⁷ Perhaps surprisingly, Miller also hosted many politicians and famous figures from around the world. The first world figure to visit Miller was General Henri Joseph Eugene Gouraud, a one-handed Frenchman, known as the "Lion of the Argonne" who fought in French Sudan in World War I. He led the French Fourth Army and the Rainbow Division (the only American unit in the Fourth Army), along with the First, Second, and Thirty-Sixth U.S. divisions, against the Germans in the 1918 Meuse-Argonne offensive, the last major battle of the war. As part of his U.S. tour, veterans from the Rainbow, Second, and Thirty-Sixth divisions organized a parade for Gouraud in Houston on August 2, 1923, ending the celebrations at Miller with addresses from the general and other military officials.⁸

Numerous political office holders and seekers discovered Miller as well. In 1924, Lt. Governor Lynch Davidson visited Miller, followed by Attorney General Dan Moody in 1926 and Senator Tom Connally in 1928. By 1932, Miller officially began hosting political rallies, charging \$50 per night (\$1,083 today), with the theatre bringing in \$250 in revenue (\$5,416 in 2023) by July of that year.⁹ By 1968, well over twenty politicians had held rallies and spoken at Miller Memorial Theatre, including eight Texas governors, Vice President Richard Nixon, Senator Lyndon B. Johnson,



Houston Police Department motorcycle officers line up in front of the original Miller Memorial Theatre in November 1931.



and Congressman George H. W. Bush who represented Houston's 7th District.¹⁰

Miller Outdoor Theatre continued to evolve, and the venue introduced the first official symphony concert on August 21, 1940. Ernst Hoffmann, a conductor and musical director of the Houston Symphony Society (now Houston Symphony), and forty-five musicians performed a variety of pieces by Strauss, Wagner, and Tchaikovsky, as well as the "Star Spangled Banner," for thousands of spectators. Underwritten with a \$1,000 (\$21,199 in 2023) donation by cotton and real estate broker N. D. Naman under the condition he remain anonymous, attendees were asked to donate "at-will" for more free shows. The concert raised \$800 (\$16,959 in 2023), and the Houston Symphony Society was so moved that its president pledged to support the rest of the symphony's season himself. Before the night ended, it was announced that enough money had been raised to continue shows for the rest of the season and the next. Thus, a tradition was born.¹¹ Jim Bernhard's first experience at Miller stems from these concerts. Having moved from Beaumont to Houston as a child in 1947, he recalled, "My first impression [of Miller Outdoor Theatre] was, 'what a nice place to have a concert.'" Thus, he whiled away many summer evenings listening to symphonies there.¹² The outdoor symphony shows were a hit, especially because they were free.

For others, their first memorable experience at Miller was not the concerts, but the hill. The large hill that sits on Miller's doorstep and serves as a tiered viewing area was built in 1948 using dirt and red clay from the excavation widening Fannin Street to accommodate traffic for the growing Texas Medical Center.¹³ It was sodded and opened a year later.¹⁴ Since its installation seventy-five years ago, the hill has grown taller and has become an iconic part of Miller and a generational right-of-passage for Houston children.

Lauren Anderson, associate director of education and community engagement at the Houston Ballet and a Houston native, recalled her first visit to Miller when she was six or seven years old. "I remember rolling down the hill and running [back up] ... turning around, and seeing the stage," she recalled, adding, "we'd get up there ... and pretend we were

performers." Anderson attended performances by Houston Ballet Academy and other organizations because "... they were free and ... always fun. There was always something fun going on there." In 1983, she performed in her first production as a company member with the Houston Ballet, playing a horse in *Cinderella*.¹⁵ Anderson excelled as a dancer and became Houston Ballet's, as well as the country's, first Black principal ballerina in 1990.¹⁶

In 1968, the city constructed a new full proscenium theatre funded with city bonds, marking a dramatic change in Miller's direction.¹⁷ "It was an awesome building," Bernhard said, of the venue now fully equipped with backstage areas, lights, and wings. "I go, 'this is something very different.' And so, of course, did Frank Young."¹⁸

A musical theatre advocate, Frank Young convinced Houston's mayor Louie Welch that Miller needed more than symphony performances. Thus, Young produced and directed the musical *Bells Are Ringing* at Miller in 1968, which became TUTS's first production.¹⁹ Choreographed by Patsy Swayze, mother of late actor Patrick Swayze, the show was a huge success and inspired other organizations, such as the Houston Grand Opera, Houston Ballet, Society for the Performing Arts, and others to produce and perform shows at Miller.²⁰ Young went on to produce more smash hits with TUTS, including the 1972 production of *South Pacific* that



Five dancers pose outside of Miller Outdoor Theatre in 1945.



The set of Theatre Under the Stars's production of South Pacific by Rogers and Hammerstein in 1972 featured a twenty-seven-foot lagoon in part of the orchestra pit, with rock scenery to the far right. Over 25,000 people turned out for the show directed by Frank Young.

included a candlelit processional, an eighteen-foot waterfall, an impressive twenty-seven-foot lagoon in the orchestra pit, and high divers.²¹ Young's production of *Bells Are Ringing* started a tradition of offering free musicals, along with other types of performances.

For some, a free show is not tempting. "Usually when you hear something's free, your initial thought is 'well, it must not be very good.' That is not the case [at Miller]," declared Cissy Segall Davis, managing director of the Miller Theatre Advisory Board, who is dedicated to changing this perception through high quality programming. Her proudest achievement during her forty plus years at Miller is "the quality of the programming that has improved over the years." She affirms, "If it's out here, it's good. It's the same quality you're going to find at the downtown [Theatre District] ... it's really critical that people understand that ... you come to Miller because it is good and because you know you're going to see [a] good [show], and that you're going to enjoy it."²²



The Golden Dragon Acrobats, traditional Chinese acrobats, defy gravity while simultaneously riding a unicycle in a 2009 performance. Miller Outdoor Theatre offers diverse cultural programming that entertains and enlightens its audiences.

Free performances expand public access to the performing arts by removing the barrier of ticket costs and enables Miller to stand out as the only free open-air theatre of its kind in the United States.²³ Bernhard pointed out, "There have been some people on city council who thought '...people ought to pay an admission fee.' But this, I think, would defeat the whole purpose that makes Miller Theatre such a great institution—that it's there for everyone whether they can afford it or not."²⁴

The City of Houston and Friends of Hermann Park, now the Hermann Park Conservancy, funded a \$6-million expansion and renovation in 1996, replacing the roof and adding restrooms, office space, and a small stage.²⁵ In January 2023, Miller Outdoor Theatre launched a \$12.5 million fundraising campaign focused primarily on improving the audience experience. The proposal includes improving the fixed seating and lawn experience and creating an entry gateway.²⁶ "The entry way [will give] a sense of arrival at a really, really special place," Davis said of the construction projects, adding. "And that's what Miller is."²⁷

In considering the next hundred years at Miller, building on what they have done right in the past seems to be a common thread. Bernhard hopes Miller will maintain what it is doing now to stay successful. Anderson hopes that programing continues to be free of charge and that people will continue to patronize the theatre. Davis, responsible for getting the shows on stage, hopes the next century focuses on improvement inside the theatre such as bigger storage and expanded dressing room and backstage space to make the artists more comfortable, to name a few. "Most importantly," Davis hopes it "[will] still be a place for all Houstonians to be proud of."²⁸

When looking back through Miller's history, the memories come flooding in. In reflecting on her favorite show, Davis takes little time to answer: *Tommy Tune Tonight* in 2016, a one-man-show by dancer, singer, and actor Tommy Tune about his life. "To be able to bring him—a performer of that stature, a ten-time Tony winner, a former Houstonian ... it was just a really special, special, special performance," she said. Bernhard's favorite Miller memories involved performing in two shows he had written with Frank Young—*Sir Jack*, a musical version of Shakespeare's plays about fictional character Sir John Falstaff, and *Ninfa!*, a musical about matriarch Ninfa Lorenzo who started Houston's famous Ninfa's restaurants specializing in Tex-Mex food.²⁹

Looking at the 2023 season, Davis teases that it is a jam-packed season that focuses on milestone celebration. The season opened with a joyous performance of Irish dancing and music by the Trinity Irish Dance Company on March 17, St. Patrick's Day. The centennial festivities kicked off the next day with a 1920s-esque performance by the legendary Hot Sardines.³⁰ Miller will celebrate turning 100 on May 12, with a performance by the Houston Ballet, and TUTS will give a special tribute performance on July 14. The season will end with an immersive, technologically advanced collaboration between *Bella Gaia* and the William Close & The Earth Harp Collective



An entry way is one of the proposed construction projects from the \$12.5 million fundraising campaign for the Miller centennial celebration. The project aims to modernize and improve visitors' arrival experience and provide some added shade, as Miller enters a new century.

on November 11.³¹ “The idea is to go from the twenties through the year—different performances through the years that kind of get us to the future,” Davis explained. “We’ll have birthday cake, fun things for the kids, and ... different things that help us celebrate.” The 2023 season includes cultural performances, workshops, ballet, and even interactive murals.³²

The celebratory feeling of this season is welcomed, especially after a rough two years. The pandemic proved particularly devastating for Miller’s budget since 85 percent of the theatre’s funds come from the hotel occupancy tax. In 2020 and 2021 with travel cutbacks, the occupancy tax funding dropped by 65 percent. Davis revealed, “That is a huge hit for an organization that re-grants that money to performing arts groups to put on programming here at Miller Outdoor Theatre and offer it free of charge to the public.” Davis had cancelled

all performances until theatre manager Shawn Hauptmann suggested turning the stage into a studio and live-streaming performances—a first for the theatre. “We weren’t quite sure how it was going to work; we weren’t sure if anybody would care and log-on

and want to be part of it,” Davis admitted. Miller worked with twelve organizations to put on shows in the 2020 season that reported 93,000 views on live streams. Miller plans to continue this new tradition of streaming, making live performances accessible digitally to audience members near and far.

Miller Outdoor Theatre has certainly impacted those who have worked to make it a special place. For example, Davis’s love of music and musical theatre and her passion for the performing arts motivated her to move from for-profit entertainment work into non-profit work to advance Miller’s mission. Benhard, whose fascination with the theatre began as a child in 1947, was inspired by his love of the arts and performing to work with TUTS at Miller for decades. Similarly, Anderson’s passion for dance and the shows she saw at Miller opened the door to performing there, as she embarked on a prestigious ballet career.

More importantly, though, Miller Outdoor Theatre has made a difference in the lives of those who visited there over the past hundred years. It has done this by evolving with entertainment trends, appealing to the city’s diverse citizenry, and offering quality, engaging programming that represents many genres of the arts. While the outdoor building and the location in a gorgeous park space make the theatre special, what makes it truly remarkable is that it makes the performing arts accessible to everyone, and they, in turn, make memories there that last a lifetime. **HH**

Samantha de León completed her master’s in public history at the University of Houston in the spring of 2023. She served as the Center for Public History’s Carey C. Shuart graduate instructional assistant for the 100 Years of Stories: Documenting a Century at the University of Houston project and *Houston History* magazine. She is a former intern for the 11 Most Endangered Sites at the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the City of Houston’s Office of Historic Preservation.



Tommy Tune tap dances in his one-man show, Tommy Tune Tonight, in 2016.