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With new partnership, Kimmel and Bucks Playhouse take on additional roles



If you think of the Kimmel Center as a city mouse — with its landmark building on Broad Street in Philadelphia — then Bucks County Playhouse, housed in a converted grist mill in New Hope, Pennsylvania, is the country mouse.

The two have entered into a partnership to share resources and talent. The first manifestation will be Bucks County Playhouse's original production of "Buddy" from last summer, staged at the Kimmel next summer. It's a new spin on a musical about Buddy Holly which premiered in London in 1989.

In turn, the Kimmel will produce concerts at the playhouse featuring musicians in its jazz residency program.

Bucks County Playhouse was once a vital part of American theater; its summer stock productions were must-see events for New York's theater crowd. But the theater went through a period of decline for several decades.

Recently, with the help of major investment and new, high-powered management, the Playhouse has experienced a revival. This new partnership with the Kimmel Center will help it regain footing with lost audiences.

"There are a lot of people who don't realize the playhouse is back," said producing director Alexander Fraser. "It's gone through this extraordinary \$6 million renovation. It's actually in better condition than it ever had been before. It's gorgeous, and we're doing great work here. This is a way for us to blow our horn in Philadelphia."

Bucks County Playhouse has never before sent one of its productions out on the road. If "Buddy" repeats in Philadelphia the success it had in New Hope, Fraser said, the company will consider packaging it as a tour.

The Kimmel Center owns or leases four major theaters downtown, having recently acquired the Merriam Theater. Partnering with Buck County Playhouse, 60 miles north, enables the Kimmel to stretch outside its downtown domain.

President Anne Ewers said the Kimmel Center's mission is to be an incubator for new work. This outpost in Bucks County expands that mission.

"We feel there is a lot of great work that they are doing," said Ewers. "But folks in Philadelphia don't necessarily have a chance to see that."

The two-week run of "Buddy" this summer will be a testing ground. Both the Kimmel and the playhouse are looking to see if it's feasible to work together, to co-produce new work.