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## Taking it 'down the Delaware': Kimmel Center and Bucks County Playhouse announce partnership

Updated: JANUARY 6, 2017



JOAN MARCUS

The cast of "Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story" which will be performed at both the Bucks County Playhouse and the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater in summer 2017 as part of a newly announced partnership between the two arts venues.

by **John Timpane**, STAFF WRITER

The Kimmel Center and the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope are partnering up.

The two arts venues have announced plans to exchange shows and perhaps arts residencies and other arts education efforts. The aim, said a statement to be released Monday, was to strengthen "the producing efforts" at both venues and "foster a cultural exchange." The partnership is the first of its kind for BCP, the latest in a series for Kimmel.

The first result will be the Bucks County production of the popular musical *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story*. [A very successful staging of \*Buddy\*](#) broke BCP box-office records last summer. [Buddy will play at BCP May 27-June 17](#) and then pack up and ramble the 40.6 miles down I-95 to the Kimmel, where it will run June 24-July 9.

"The whole thing goes in the truck, and we recreate it on the Perelman stage," said [Alexander Fraser](#), producing director of Bucks County Playhouse. "It closes on a Saturday night and opens on a Friday. I keep saying to people, 'Why can't we put this on a barge and take it down the Delaware?'"

Arts venues are looking around to diversify their offerings and strengthen community ties; in that light, this partnership holds benefits for both venues. BCP gets a foothold in the Philadelphia arts world, and Kimmel gets a sparkling production by the Tony-winning artistic brain trust at BCP, a theater in renewed health after a dark period only a few years ago.

"The Bucks County Playhouse is such an esteemed and historic entity," said Anne Ewers, president and CEO of the Kimmel Center. "When you think of all the people who have performed there, Helen Hayes, Robert Redford, Grace Kelly . . . and the work now of Alexander Fraser and [BCP executive producer] Robyn Goodman . . . why wouldn't we take this opportunity?"

Ewers called the partnership "right in line" with the Kimmel's ambitions to be an arts incubator. "It's a chance to spread our wings," she said, adding to efforts such as [the recently announced partnership with the University of the Arts](#); the [theater residency in partnership with Joe's Pub in New York](#); the [recent production of \*An American in Paris\*, for which Kimmel was a producer](#); and particularly the [jazz residency program, now in its fourth year](#). "There's a chance," she said, "that our jazz programs might come out to Bucks County."

Edward Cambron, Kimmel executive vice president, said, "Philadelphia really needs to see the theater the people at Bucks County are doing." *Buddy* was a catalyst. "We went out to see it, loved it, and said, 'Wow, we should do some partnering.'" He spoke to Jay Wahl, Kimmel artistic director, who got the wheels turning. Wahl in turn spoke of Fraser's "deep connections with Broadway and beyond, as well as with regional theater." Fraser, Goodman, and company at BCP, he said, "have done great things in reviving that playhouse."

Three or four generations ago, Philly drama lovers could travel by train up the Reading Railroad New Hope Branch to take in a play at the Bucks County Playhouse. [It opened in 1939](#) and, particularly as a summer theater, became a testing ground for Broadway, with many of the best-known actors of midcentury treading its boards. But the last passenger train into New Hope went still in 1952.

The theater endured the vagaries of regional arts centers everywhere, and a bankruptcy was declared in 2010. In something Fraser calls "a kind of miracle," the nonprofit Bridge Street Foundation raised enough money to renovate the theater, which reopened in July 2012. Fraser and Goodman, both Tony-winners, assumed their duties in January 2014.

"There are a lot of theater lovers in this area," Fraser said, "the backbone of our audience - the 'deep believers,' I call them. We know hundreds and thousands of theater lovers are out there. They're willing to go to Broadway, but may be less aware of the work we're doing here. Moving *Buddy* to the Kimmel, and the partnership going forward, is the most exciting thing that has happened since I came here."

Hunter Foster, director of *Buddy*, said he'd directed jukebox musicals before, but "what makes *Buddy* different is the arc: This young guy who in 10 months goes from humble beginnings to success, and then dies. People have an emotional reaction to this show that I haven't seen with others of the genre." He said the partnership "brings benefits for both sides and for both communities."