

A Community Treasure

An Interview with Kwofe Coleman, President and Chief Executive Officer, The Muny

EDITORS' NOTE Kwofe Coleman began his Muny career in 1998 as an usher and served as the Managing Director since 2018 before assuming his current role. Over the past two decades, he has advanced through several other positions at The Muny, including staff accountant, house manager, digital communications manager and director of marketing and communications. He oversees the organizational and business affairs of The Muny, while embracing and articulating the



Kwofe Coleman

artistic and institutional vision, developing progressive income streams and new strategic initiatives to deepen the organization's community engagement, educational and outreach efforts. In addition, Coleman serves on The Muny's Second Century Committee, a combination of key staff and board members who, together, are now implementing the theatre's Second Century Strategic Plan. He is the current President-Elect of the National Alliance for Musical Theatre, previously serving as Vice President. He was a 2018 Fellowship Advisor for the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland and is an active contributor to the St. Louis community, serving on the St. Louis University High School Board of Trustees, Cor Jesu Academy Advisory Council, the Advisory Board for Common Circles and as a founding board member of Atlas School. He also serves on the Board of Directors for the Saint Louis Club, as well as other various social service organizations. During the 2020 holiday season, he served as Executive Producer for *A New Holiday*, a short musical film created by LIFE Creative Group. Coleman is a 2015 recipient of the St. Louis American's Salute to Young Leaders Award and an inductee into the 2020 St. Louis Business Journal 40 under 40.

THEATER BRIEF The Muny (muny.org) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to enrich lives by producing exceptional musical theater, accessible to all, continuing its remarkable tradition in St. Louis' Forest Park that began in 1919.

Will you highlight the history and heritage of The Muny and how the theater has evolved?

The foundation and history of The Muny rests in a century old, civic endeavor. A partnership between the then Mayor of St. Louis

and local business leaders brought open-air theater to St. Louis in 1919. As true today as it was 103 summers ago, the importance of bringing people together for shared experience is paramount to the strength of a community and there is no clearer example of that truth than in St. Louis with The Muny. Nestled in the heart of St. Louis' Forest Park – recognized as one of the best civic parks in America – The Muny has welcomed over 54 million theater goers over its 103-year history. What began as a grass hill overlooking a natural stage

is now an impressive 11,000 seat state-of-the-art theater filled with tradition, where memories are cultivated, careers launched, and community is celebrated.

The Muny is recognized as the nation's oldest and largest outdoor musical theater. Now with a season ticket base of 25,000 across all socio-economic levels, outreach and education initiatives and industry-leading financial stability, The Muny is not simply a theater, it has become a community treasure. As it begins its second century, the dreams of its founders

have been realized. The success and longevity of the institution is most directly driven by its ability to maintain a flourishing relationship with the community it serves while continuing to evolve its national profile as a leading institution in the performing arts landscape. In 2018, we announced our now completed \$100 million-dollar Second Century Capital Campaign to not only completely renovate the sprawling campus, but to more importantly position us to continue making investments in and impacts across the St. Louis region.

Since 1919, 54 million people have made The Muny their summer tradition, with 10 million experiencing the magic of The Muny at no cost. While production costs continue to rise, we remain accessible to all, regardless of income. Over a century old, The Muny is dedicated to continuing the tradition of producing theater on its grandest scale.

How do you define the mission and purpose of The Muny?

In abbreviated form, our mission speaks to “enriching lives by producing exceptional musical theater that is accessible to all” and I believe there is great importance in the



The cast of *An Evening with the Stars* on stage at The Muny

second half of that phrase. Resources, community support and unparalleled scale allow us to produce musicals in a singular way. Our success comes with responsibility. If our impact fails to extend beyond our stage, we haven't fulfilled our promise to enrich lives. I measure our progress by our ability to achieve and ensure the "accessible to all". Free seats and community partnerships allow The Muny to welcome 28 percent of our audience at no cost. Pathway programs provide access for young people to work alongside the leaders of this industry so that we can ensure that the next generation of theater makers, leaders and professionals have access to meaningful training. But ultimately, it comes back to what we put on stage. We have one of the largest stages in musical theater. It is imperative that in the stories we tell on that stage, in the performers who bring them to life, in the decision-makers on the creative and business sides of this institution, we reflect a true cross section of society. I believe that theater, especially ours, must be a place of inclusion and a source of opportunity.

How did The Muny adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the pandemic?

While the pandemic tested resilience and fostered perseverance, the extended intermission it caused in our work forced, or rather allowed, us to re-evaluate our practices across the board. Hybrid work schedules, vastly expanded health and safety protocols with the formation of a COVID task force, and vaccination requirements for high-risk work groups highlight our efforts. I am proud to recognize that in the summer of 2021, due to those efforts, The Muny was one of the first theaters in the country to bring live theater back, but we didn't return as the exact same theater we once were. Our evolution is an energizing reality. We learned during the pandemic that if there is work that can be done remotely, allowing staff time with families or alleviating them from some constant childcare challenges, that is what we should do. During the summer of 2020, when theater programming and education initiatives across the country moved to virtual platforms, we appreciated, more than ever, the sense of together that simply cannot be achieved through the screen and that sense of inclusion and cohesion is ever present in our current decision-making. There were also some harder lessons without clear immediate solutions. Too many of the groups of people who make performing arts possible, from actors to stagehands, designers to musicians, lack a clear mechanism to solicit and receive support in moments like this pandemic. They are part of our institutional "family" and helping them develop systems for backstopping is a necessary collective effort.

How did the focus on education develop at The Muny and will you highlight the educational programs offered?

During the strategic planning process leading up to our centennial season, we asked ourselves how The Muny could better use its resources and reach to create equitable opportunity through theater in The Muny's second



Kwofe Coleman at The Muny

century. We determined that with a strategically built initiative, we could use this theater to help prepare next generations for whatever careers they ultimately choose. In a given summer season, we will employ more than 800 people across a vast array of disciplines. Each of those jobs and disciplines represents a potential opportunity or a future career.

Under our new, thriving Crawford Taylor Education Initiative, we currently offer 13 educational programs and the offerings are ever-changing in response to what is needed. For example, in 2020 The Muny launched Muny U, a virtual program where theater courses across the country selected a Muny-employed theater professional, from Broadway stars to arts administrators, for a multi-week online class as part of their curriculum. One of my favorite programs is our Technical Theater Training program. It pairs high school juniors and seniors with professional theater trades people and helps those interested students develop marketable skills in those areas. Through Muny in Schools, students from the Special School District join forces with other local high schoolers for a day of ensemble building activities that culminates in a revue performance by the students. Graduates from our nationally acclaimed Muny Kids and Teens program have gone on to headline some of Broadway's greatest hits while others have carried the lessons they gleaned to help them in careers unrelated to theater. Our internships and intensives draw the best and brightest from across the country.

Twenty-four years ago, I was a 16-year-old usher in this same theater and an intern in the accounting office. Today, as President and CEO, I am acutely aware of the reality that education and access can lead a young person to dreams they have yet to imagine.

Will you discuss The Muny's commitment to the environment and sustainability?

I think one of the things that makes The Muny a special place is the unmistakable intersection of art and nature that defines our theater. Our original stage was a flat grassy plain between two mighty oak trees which were a beloved and welcomed feature of every production. Until it simply became unsafe for those centuries old trees to hang over audiences, we spared no expense in preserving that history. Over the years we have continued to populate the tree canopy over the stage and as part of our recent renovation, seven large trees, including

two grand oaks flanking the new stage, were incorporated in the stage design. To ensure their longevity and health, protective structures were built underground, providing a natural safe environment for the trees to flourish for future generations of Muny audiences. Additional renovations to our buildings and campus were all designed with the best possible energy efficiencies, incorporation of solar power and greenspace as deciding factors. An important ideal instilled in me from my predecessor Denny Reagan is to "leave any place better than you found it."

The Muny has an engaged and committed board of directors. How valuable has it been in leading The Muny to have the experience and expertise of your Board to support your efforts in fulfilling The Muny's mission?

Throughout our history, The Muny has enjoyed the great benefit of having true pillars of our community serve on our Board of Directors, and I am immensely grateful that it remains true. How we define that concept of community pillar has continued to evolve and I am humbled and energized by the breadth of experience, background and level of engagement our current Board brings. Global CEOs, MDs, educators, community leaders are among the foundation I lean on as I lead The Muny into its next generation. Their support has been bolstering and their guidance, especially in these recently unprecedented times, invaluable.

While our national profile continues to evolve, the heart of this theater belongs to the people of St. Louis. Having board members lead with compassion, courage and tenacity creates a better region and community at large. Those who make The Muny a part of their summer for generations make it possible for this institution to thrive. Beyond the immense business, theater and philanthropic knowledge they bring from their own fields, this board governs from a place of true investment in this theater as patrons and visionaries of The Muny's mission.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?

The key to effective leadership is remaining unphased by the power but comfortable with the weight of the responsibility the role carries. I approach management as an opportunity to every day find a way to put my team in an even better position to excel. They trust me to make the decisions, assemble the resources and mold a vision that capitalizes on their excellence. In return, I challenge them to continuously evolve their methods. That can take on many forms. Sometimes it's a difficult conversation about refocusing direction, but far more often it's the opportunity to recognize and encourage a success; small or large. A leader is not a dictator, but rather an example, a guide and a backstop. Ultimately, I feel the staff needs to see in me and my work, a representation of culture we strive for as a team. Our community and patrons need to see in me, a representative of the great work and the remarkable people who make our mission a reality. ●