

Agency for Change Podcast: Bill Stephan Executive Director and Chief Artistic Officer, Lied Center for Performing Arts

Bill Stephan:

I hope that many people that come to the Lied Center are able to say, "This is a moment I'm going to treasure forever."

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Kelley Peterson:

There's magic that happens during live performance between an audience and the artist, and for a lot of venues across the country, that magic was hard to recreate via Zoom or other online methods. There's one such venue right here in Lincoln that accomplished some really impressive things this past year, even earning recognition from the New York Times, USA Today, and more, all while bringing some world-famous acts to the city and in the process, helping to transform lives. Hi, everyone. This is Kelley Peterson, vice president, nonprofit creative director at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest is Bill Stephan, executive director and chief artistic officer at the Lied Center for Performing Arts, which aims to educate, inspire, and entertain the people of Nebraska through the performing arts. Bill, I'm eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you are making on the world.

Bill Stephan:

Thank you. My pleasure to be here today.

Kelley Peterson:

Bill, for those who may not be familiar with the Lied Center for Performing Arts, what does it do for the community?

Bill Stephan:

Well, the Lied Center is Nebraska's performing arts center and so we're not only just for Lincoln, but we're across the state. And people actually come from all over the Midwest to see the greatest artists in the world. And the original vision of the Lied Center was that you didn't have to go to Chicago or New York or Los Angeles to see the greatest artists in the world. You could see it in Lincoln, Nebraska. And so you could see that in your home state, for university students. And so that original vision is still very active today, that you don't have to travel and you can see Yo-Yo Ma and Wynton Marsalis and American Ballet Theater. It was interesting.

Bill Stephan:

When we had the Russian National Orchestra, we had an exchange student that was enrolled at the University of Nebraska, and she'd always wanted to see the Russian National Orchestra, never could see it in Russia and had come all the way to Lincoln, Nebraska to see the Russian National Orchestra. So

really, the Lied Center provides access to these performances that are transformative, that are magical, every genre you can imagine. Our programming philosophy is something for everyone so we range from the world's greatest orchestras to Broadway shows to modern dance to theater, country artists, family shows, comedy. We try to provide something for everyone and we try to have every one of those artists at the very highest level of artistic quality and creativity.

Kelley Peterson:

That is so great. And when you mean everyone, you mean everyone. I've been going to the Lied Center for years and especially for me, it's been a magical place for many reasons.

Bill Stephan:

Wonderful. I'm glad to hear that.

Kelley Peterson:

I understand that you lived in Idaho before moving to Nebraska in 2008. Can you walk me through the career path that brought you to the Lied Center for Performing Arts?

Bill Stephan:

Sure. Well, the arts have been part of my family culture since I was a child. When I think back, some of my fondest childhood memories is singing songs that are Reader's Digest Songbooks with my mom playing the piano. And I can remember doing that as my earliest memories of life. And I played trumpet and did musical theater, did lots of singing. In high school, my dream was I wanted to be on Broadway and do Broadway shows and did a lot of performing. And then when I got into college, I went to Boise State University and was a performance major. And then I had an opportunity to do some programming of bringing performing artists to campus at Boise State. And I really enjoyed it, more so than I thought I would, because I'd never done anything but performing my whole life until that moment. I thought, "This is kind of fun," in terms of bringing these great artists and promoting them and doing fundraising and organizing and bringing joy to these crowds of people.

Bill Stephan:

And I had record numbers of attendance compared to past programs that have been done with other student programmers and fundraising records and grants and created a series on campus and just had a lot of success. So then I went into doing both, still performing and arts administration. After I graduated, my first full-time job was I was the managing director of Idaho Dance Theater, which is a professional contemporary dance company. I was the only employee. I was their first full-time employee. They handed me the accounting records on the backs of envelopes, I remember. I had to create an entire accounting system, I had to do all the tax reports, I did all the marketing. And trying to sell a modern contemporary dance show and in Boise, Idaho, is not the easiest task.

Bill Stephan:

I like marketing, it's a creative business. How to sell a show as an art. And that's one of the things that I love about arts administration. And I quickly learned that having stunning photography that attracts attention, having video that stimulates the mind and the heart, having a title, the words you use to describe an artist, make a difference. And if you really hone-in on these items and you have a product that's worth promoting, you have to have a great product, you can convince people to come to modern

dance in Boise, Idaho. I had a lot of success with them, and then I had an opportunity to manage my first venue. And I applied to be the director of the Nampa Civic Center, which is just outside of Boise.

Bill Stephan:

It's a performing arts convention center complex. It had been in existence for a few years and they asked me, "We feel like we're underutilizing this venue. We want to have a performing arts series. We want to have artists from all over the world come and perform in the center." And I said, "I would love to help you do that." And I'd had some experience in venue management also when I was at Boise State with the student union. So it was really kind of a perfect opportunity for me, was there for 10 years, grew a really vibrant performing arts series and attendance and fundraising and expanded the venue. After being there for 10 years, I thought to myself, "Is there really much more I can do here?" That was when I started seeking other opportunities of kind of my next step in my career.

Bill Stephan:

And I noticed there was an ad for a position at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln, Nebraska. And I called them and I said, "Hey, will you send me a brochure? I'd like to see the seasoned brochure for the Lied Center." Mailed me a brochure and I looked at it and I said, "Wow, this is the place I want to be." Literally every art form, most exceptional artists, all the things I'd always ever wanted to do, but necessarily couldn't, could happen at the Lied Center for Performing Arts. So I was thrilled and they selected me to come to the Lied Center. It's interesting, I do have some Nebraska roots and that my great, great grandfather was at a home center in the late 1800s around Edgar, Nebraska. My grandmother grew up in Nebraska. I had never been to Nebraska prior to coming for my interview for the Lied Center.

Bill Stephan:

And I've just loved it. And we've had so much success together since 2009, since I've been at the Lied. For the first day I was there through today, anything is possible at the Lied Center for Performing Arts. We could bring any artist, dream up any special program because there's passion for the arts in Nebraska and the Lied Center venue can really accommodate any type of program. And I just feel so lucky. There's so few places like the Lied Center in the world that has the diversity of programming, the depth of education that we provide to kids of all ages. I feel so lucky to be at the Lied. It's been a great run since I've been there and looking forward to many more great things in the future.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, I think Lincoln and the Lied Center for Performing Arts is lucky to have you, Bill, for sure. And just in answering that question, you are certainly still a singer because you've been singing music to my ears about marketing, communications, and what a difference it makes to sell shows and just about everything else.

Bill Stephan:

If I wasn't doing performing arts, I think I would love to do marketing because I really do enjoy that and the creative process of "how do you communicate and inspire people to try something?"

Kelley Peterson:

Yes. Call to action, for sure.

Bill Stephan:

Yes.

Kelley Peterson:

And I love to think about marketing and communications as an art form as well.

Bill Stephan:

Yes.

Kelley Peterson:

So music to my ears, for sure. So Bill, is there a Lied performance that stands out to you as being particularly memorable and what made that event stand out?

Bill Stephan:

Well, every year there's a long list of shows that just blow me away and that I treasure and can't wait to see of them again. So that's a question that's really hard because we've had so many exceptional performances at the Lied and we continue to have them. I'm getting ready for Bernadette Peters this Saturday night. And I think back of when we had her about 10 years ago, and I'll never forget when she sang *There's Nothin' Like a Dame* and got on top of the piano and just entertained the heck out of our audience. It was so fun. But a few performances that come to mind, our biggest event in the history of the Lied Center, in terms of the uniqueness, no place else in the world could you see this event, and that's when we combined American Ballet Theater with the St. Louis Symphony, Misty Copeland as Firebird.

Bill Stephan:

Never before had American Ballet Theater performed with one of the top American orchestras. And so it was such a privilege to be the matchmaker of those two organizations and have them come together in Lincoln, Nebraska, and perform multiple performances. Over 6,000 people got to see American Ballet Theater, which is America's ballet company with Misty Copeland as Firebird and the St. Louis Symphony in the pit. I mean, they're normally on the stage. I mean, they're the main attraction normally. And they were supporting American Ballet Theater. I mean, they were the star of the show as well, but they're normally not in the pit. They're not a pit orchestra, they're a main stage orchestra. And to have them with American Ballet Theater, it was magical. So that was definitely one of my favorite memories.

Bill Stephan:

Having them back this summer, in the park...American Ballet Theater picked the Lied Center in Lincoln, Nebraska, to launch their national tour and Dance Across America, and it was so magical to turn Pioneer's Park into a theater, a field that was nothing but a parking lot and a big grass field with some trees around it, turned it into a theater. Six thousand people came out, saw the show for free. I still have people constantly tell me how it was one of their best moments of their life. American Ballet Theater loved being at the Lied Center, loved being at Pioneer Park. They shared with me that, on that year when they came for Firebird, it was the favorite place they toured in the world. They went all over Europe, all over America and Lincoln, Nebraska, that's what they shared with the board of directors, was their favorite community and the Lied Center. And I think part of it was everyone appreciate the talent.

Bill Stephan:

On a Saturday night of that run of Firebird, the audience stood up after every dance. I've never seen a performance where literally the audience gave a standing ovation after every piece. It was like crazy. I do have to say Wynton Marsalis, multiple times that he's been at the Lied Center, had been too my favorite. The first time he was there at the Lied Center was really special for me, because I'd been a huge Wynton Marsalis's fan my whole life and to present him was a real honor. One of his performances, recently he did a Duke Ellington program that was just phenomenal, that he told you all the inside scoop on the inspiration of the songs and the background and the history. And it was just so inspiring, and the band was so good. A little unlikely as one of my favorites, but it was so meaningful, in 2020, we hadn't had any full programs at the Lied Center from March of 2020 to September.

Bill Stephan:

And we had some events but not traditional season events. And when we had NEWSical the Musical from New York City, it's a comedy show and they opened up, it was such a good feeling to be back in the theater, even though we were socially distanced with masks, to be back and to be entertained and hear top voices singing and listening to the audience applaud. And the artists were so happy and that was such a wonderful moment to be back. And lucky for us, we were back way sooner than most other theaters. There are some theaters that are still close now. And we were part of maybe one or 2% of theaters nationally. We were the first university performing center to reopen. And so that was a magical moment. Plus, NEWSical the Musical was produced by someone from Lincoln.

Bill Stephan:

Michael D'Angora was from Lincoln and he's one of the producers of that show. So that was really fun. They made t-shirts that said National Tour and that listed Lincoln, Nebraska. And that was it. Everybody's national tour to the Lied Center or most people's national tour in 2020, in '21 was just to the Lied Center and back home. That was it. We were the only place and it was so crazy and it continues to be. Even now, we have people that we're their first time back on the stage.

Kelley Peterson:

Oh my gosh, such incredible ones. And just on a personal level, I've danced in Lincoln Midwest Ballet Company's Nutcracker show. This last year was my 11th year. And I have to agree, there's something about knowing greatness, that I'm walking backstage in the hallways where Misty Copeland also walked, doing my thing is a pretty magical experience at that. And I do know, that of course the Nutcracker normally happens in December, but that year, hitting the stage anyway that March and bringing Christmas in March was really quite something for everyone that participates in that show as well as every audience member that was there. So very magical, but staying on the-

Bill Stephan:

That was a magical moment and having thousands of people coming back for the Nutcracker was so great. It was so wonderful to see.

Kelley Peterson:

It was so great and so important to the community. And that just shows how important the arts are to everyone. And it was lots of great moments there and I'm glad they're still happening, continuing to happen. But on the topic of that favorite subject of the pandemic, this topic that a lot of folks are tired of

talking about, but if you'll bear with me, I was wondering if you could tell me about how the Lied Center adapted to the challenges of the pandemic, and you've already mentioned a couple of them.

Bill Stephan:

Well, first of all, I want to celebrate the Lied Center staff and the donors and patrons, the University of Nebraska for their commitment during the pandemic. Without an amazing staff, we couldn't have pulled off what we've been able to do the couple years. But when the pandemic started, I remember sitting in the University of Nebraska chancellor's conference room, we were talking about shutting down all of the cultural institutions on campus and closing. And one of the things I wrote on a sticky note was, "Closed until further notice. Is that awful - closed until further notice?" I still have that sticky, because I was just like, "What an awful thing to write now." And I thought to myself at that moment, "How is this going to end? When do we reopen? What's going to happen to all the staff? What's going to happen to me? Are we going to have to lay off everyone? When is it safe? When is this going to end?"

Bill Stephan:

And so those were thoughts, just kind of horrifying thoughts that took place early in the pandemic. And I had a certain level of confidence in the University that things were going to be okay because obviously the University of Nebraska is committed to the Lied Center and to all the institutions and employees and students. But you couldn't help but worry, particularly in an industry that depends on crowds. Pandemic and crowds aren't good. It's not a good business to be in, but I thought to myself, "We've got to find a way to fulfill our mission. We have to still educate, inspire, and entertain the people of Nebraska, even in a pandemic." And so we quickly started brainstorming and coming up with ways.

Bill Stephan:

So we went online, we started an online program called Lied Live. It started two weeks after our first canceled event. We took live music into the streets with our Music on the Move. So we had a live band pulled by a bike and entertained people at their homes and their front yards. We had parades that were socially distanced. And then we found a way to reopen safely. We studied all the guidelines, worked with the University of Nebraska Medical Center, the University of Nebraska COVID team, Lancaster County, city of Lincoln, looked with the CDC, did international research in how the best way is to safely reopen. We figured it out. And we had our first event actually in July of 2020, safely reopen, and we were the first major university of performing arts center to do so. And it was so wonderful to find a way.

Bill Stephan:

And we continued to have programs. I rebooked our schedule countless times. I can't tell you how many different things I booked and went away and booked and went away. But finally, I started finding some traction in certain types of artists that worked within our seating. Limitation was about 600 seats. That's if we could attract 600 people to come to a show in the pandemic, which we averaged about 300 to 400 people who came out. That was our average attendance during that first year of 2020-21. And like I mentioned earlier, we were mostly the only place they performed. We were the first place they performed since the beginning of the pandemic. Artists were crying backstage. They were filled with joy to be able to be back. I remember we had our original star, Derrick Davis of Phantom of the Opera.

Bill Stephan:

I had a chance to connect with him when he was at the Lied Center for our 30th anniversary season and said, "Hey, you are so talented. We'd love to have you back sometime." And so we exchanged some

information and had kept in touch. And then during the pandemic, I thought, "Oh, wouldn't it be great to have him do an evening of Broadway?" We had 30,000 people see him as the Phantom. Wouldn't that be a nice fit? And he said, "I'd love to come back." He created a show just for us. And he worked on it for months. I'm anticipating that he'll perform it at other places and things, but it was fantastic, doing songs from the different shows he's done on Broadway. And it was just amazing. And artists after artists just did exceptional things.

Bill Stephan:

Chris Thile, multiple Grammy award winning mandolin player. I like to call him the Yo-Yo Ma of the mandolin. He did an exceptional performance at the Lied Center. We had the Silkroad that spring, which was created by Yo-Yo Ma. They did a world premier during the pandemic, in that spring of '21. So many good things, but would not have been possible without us coming up with a safe plan, which we had so many people helping us to do that, with the staff that was courageous and willing to do it. We were writing the manual, as there was no manual to get, we had to write it and found a way to do it and a lot of courage, a lot of dedication, artists that were willing to come to the Lied Center and it all worked out so well. And as I look back, I'm so thankful and it was amazing to be featured in USA Today and the New York Times.

Bill Stephan:

National Endowment for the Arts, they created a publication called the Art of Reopening. And we are the first organization that they feature in that publication, featured throughout it, along with the many other great organizations in the nation. And so as I look back, definitely a challenging time, the most difficult times in the history of the Lied Center, but also some of our best moments where we rose above the challenge and continue to fulfill our mission. So I'm really thankful that we were able to accomplish what we've been able to accomplish. And we're still riding that wave of support and programs. And next year, I think we may have our best season in the history of the Lied Center.

Kelley Peterson:

So much success to share. So with that being said, what's the secret behind locating and bringing performances like Come From Away or the American Ballet to Lincoln? Is there a dream performance out there that you'd like to bring?

Bill Stephan:

Well, I think the secrets of the success is great artists, always going for the very best artists in every genre. And I think that's the success of the Lied Center and no matter whether you're seeing someone playing mandolin or the ukulele, we have the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain this spring. And who would think of coming to see an orchestra of ukuleles? But they're amazing. They're the very best of what they do and people love them. And so, yeah, having the best artist in every genre is the big key success. Our dreams for the future, there are a lot of artists that I'd love to see come to the Lied Center. We always bring a big orchestra to the Lied Center. We have St. Louis Symphony coming in March of 2022.

Bill Stephan:

The Berlin Philharmonic, I'm really hoping to come to the Lied Center sometime in the near future. I'd like to bring American Ballet Theater back. That was such an amazing collaboration. One of my favorite music goals of all time and one of the many Lied Center patrons' musicals is Les Misérables. I think we

have to have that back some time. A few artists we've never had, Jennifer Hudson or John Legend or Vince Gill. Those are a few names of some artists that I'd like to see. I'm constantly adding artists who are prospect list of who do we want to bring and finding who's the next Pavarotti, who's the next Misty Copeland, and searching for those artists and making sure that the Lied Center is one of the first places to present that artist.

Bill Stephan:

Maybe we're the very first. Creating new work, like our collaboration with ABT. We created a show called *Puddin' and The Grumble* a few years ago in partnership with the Lincoln Community Foundation, and finding ways that arts can solve community problems is really wonderful. So I think it's a dedication to the greatest artists and different genres, as well as finding ways to create new art and showcase it on the stage. And so there's lots of opportunities in the future and every year, I hope everybody finds what they're looking for and more at the Lied.

Kelley Peterson:

Listening to your responses, I'm so excited for the future and can't wait to be in the seats as much as possible as usual. So our state and Lincoln have become much more diverse places in terms of culture and race and sexual orientation. Describe your work to appeal to broader audiences and how you bring in diverse performances and performers like Anna Deavere Smith and who was on this season's schedule. Can you tell us about that?

Bill Stephan:

Sure. Well, the Lied Center has been a place where there's been diverse programming since it opened back in 1990. However, we definitely have increased our volume of programs and our efforts on diversity inclusion, anti-racism in partnership with the university. Back in 2016, actually when chancellor Harvey Perlman has made a statement of about racism, not here, not now, not ever, we said, "How can we help with that? How can we serve the University and partner?" And we've been trying to increase the volume of programming that sheds light on these topics, inspires conversation, inspires positive change since that time. Our vision is we want the Lied Center to be a place for everyone, absolutely everyone, and to celebrate diverse culture, arts, and people. In 2019, we created a program called the Mosaic Series and it's idea-driven, curiosity-fueled, and radically inclusive.

Bill Stephan:

And our presentation of Anna Deavere Smith doing *Notes From the Field* was part of that. It's been a wonderful success in bringing some of the as diverse artists in the nation. Bill T. Jones, we had come a few years ago, presented an amazing program that involved artists, every walk of life, from the community and it was such a magical program. We have *The Band's Visit* this spring, which is one of the most diverse Broadway musicals. You don't think of Broadway being diverse, but we're fortunate enough to have one of the most diverse Broadway shows in history coming to the Lied Center, called *The Band's Visit*, won 10 Tony awards, including best musical, never been in Nebraska before. And it mixes Middle Eastern music with Broadway, so very unique. You don't see those kinds of combinations normally.

Bill Stephan:

And so we're really excited about that. Diane Schuur we have coming, not the traditional diversity people think of, but Diane has been performing without sight since she was born. And she'll be sharing in a conversation on campus about what it's like to be someone without sight and as a professional artist, as

a Grammy winner and some of the challenges she's had to overcome. I'm sure, also being a woman, those challenges and how she's been treated in her life. Diversity inclusion, anti-racism, it's very important to the Lied Center and to the University of Nebraska. But ultimately, our vision is that we want everyone to feel welcome and be welcome at the Lied Center and that hopefully our programs will showcase the world on our stage. Actually, Yo-Yo Ma had a quote that says, "The Lied Center puts the world on one stage," and we hope to continue to do that in the most meaningful way and creating positive change and hopefully appreciating each other, including our differences, in a good way.

Kelley Peterson:

It sounds like you're doing so much in that area already. And what a great quote from Yo-Yo Ma. Wow.

Bill Stephan:

Yes, yes. Yeah, we appreciate that quote from him.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely. So the Lied Center's vision is to transform the lives of people in Nebraska through performing arts. Why is that so important? And how have you seen the effects of those kinds of transformations firsthand?

Bill Stephan:

I know personally when I see a great performance, it can't help but touch my life. Sometimes that transformation is just going from an ordinary day, or maybe it's a bad day, into a great day, to giving yourself hope and joy and sharing that with your friends and your family, and you can transform your life and enjoy life because of having the arts, the magic of performance in it. It's a wonderful thing. And so that's on a simple level, but also it changes your perspective. Anna Deavere Smith in her recent show, she interviewed over 350 people from across the nation about the school to prison pipeline. And she shared actual scripts, you know, the words of these many of these people. And it gave us the opportunity to put ourselves in the shoes of people that live lives that are much different people whose lives, face discrimination and circumstances that you wouldn't wish upon anyone.

Bill Stephan:

It transforms your perspective so often, with different programs. Career-wise, the Lied Center, I'll never forget. We had Kristin Chenoweth at the Lied Center and she worked with some of our students, some of our students got to sing with her on stage. And one of the singers was a business major and a music major. She was double majoring and Kristin Chenoweth and she had a little chance to talk. One of the things that Kristin said is, "Follow your dream, have confidence in yourself. Do what makes you happy. Do what that voice is telling you inside, fulfill your potential." And she said, "I'm going to do it. I'm going to focus on what I really believe in, what I really want to do, what I really love, what is my passion and that is performance." And so she fully went on board with her performance and graduated in that and has been successful in following that dream. And so that's certainly a big transformation for that person.

Bill Stephan:

We also had a dance group tour across Nebraska a few years ago and did workshops and some of the dancers got to perform with these dancers on stage in their own community. We have a program called Arts Across Nebraska, where we take arts programs to cities all the way from Nebraska City to Scottsbluff. One of the dancers, in particular, was part of that and was so inspired from that program, she

decided to, number one, go to University of Nebraska as her choice of college and to major in dance. So that was a huge transformation of her being just a person in high school, not really knowing what they wanted to do, taking that class and being involved with Arts Across Nebraska from the Lied Center and influencing where she went to college and what she wanted to do with her life. And she went on to graduate with the dance program being a big part of her college experience at the university. And so those are a few examples of transforming lives.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely. What great examples too! And I'm sure fun to track what they do-

Bill Stephan:

Yes, absolutely.

Kelley Peterson:

Over their lives is great. So a lot of work goes into creating a space like the Lied Center for Performing Arts. And I've heard that it has the biggest stage in all of Nebraska. What can you tell us about how the venue was built and the intentional choices that went into making it an ideal space for both performances of all kinds, as well as an accommodating space for audience members with a disability?

Bill Stephan:

So the Lied Center, when they created it, they really did do their research extremely well. They wanted to create a venue that could accommodate anything. It could be a big symphony orchestra, it could be a Broadway musical, they wanted the stage and all of the physical functions to be able to handle anything. Anything should be able to be performed at Nebraska's Performing Arts Center. And they definitely accomplished that. And they actually toured around the world looking for inspiration, like the red seats were inspired by many of the theaters in Europe. And just did an amazing job of researching around the world and with some of the greatest theaters. Early in the years of the Lied Center, Isaac Stern, one of the most famous classical musicians of all time performed in the opening season of the Lied Center.

Bill Stephan:

So one of the stories is funny that during the performance, he said, "The acoustics in this hall are amazing." Something you may not know is that as you can hear every little thing that I do on my instrument, I can hear everything that you're doing, which is kind of interesting. But he loved it. But it is true that when you are in that hall, you can hear everything from the back row... You can sit in the back row, you can hear everything that's happening on stage. The acoustics are amazing for natural acoustics. And he called back after he went back to New York and said, "Hello, this is Isaac Stern and I want to talk to you a little bit about the acoustics at the Lied Center." And our technical director, Dan Stratman said, "Isaac Stern. Yeah, right."

Bill Stephan:

Didn't really believe that it was Isaac Stern. "No, really this is Isaac Stern. And I'd like to talk with you about who did your acoustics, because we're updating Carnegie Hall and we would like to consult them and have them be part of our renovation planning." So what a great honor to have one of the greatest classic musicians in the world call us and ask for the advice of the people who created the Lied Center in their renovations of Carnegie Hall. The Lied Center really is set to accommodate anything. The stage size is giant. When it was built... And this is folklore that's been shared with me. I haven't verified this. I

haven't gone around to measure other people's stages, but the proscenium width, we have a 70-foot-wide proscenium, which is very big.

Bill Stephan:

That's the width of it. And it's almost 73 deep from the edge of the stage to the back wall. Then you also have the wings space, when you're actually in the middle of the stage on the sides. So that's additional space. So it really is a giant space. And the folklore is that when the Lied Center was built, there was not a bigger stage between Chicago and Denver as the Lied Center for Performing Arts. No one's proven to be otherwise at any theater in Nebraska or in the area, but we're certainly so thankful that we have the stage that we have because we really are able to accommodate giant sets with like Phantom of the Opera and the artists love coming to the Lied. "Oh, this is so spacious. It's so beautiful. It's so well taken care of it. It is everything you'd want." And that's really wonderful.

Bill Stephan:

In terms of accessibility, accessibility has been one of the priorities to the Lied Center since the very beginning. We actually doubled the amount of wheelchair spaces in recent years, including during the pandemic. We took out some regular seats and created a whole new platform on the main floor at the Lied Center. So we're very committed to people with accessibility access, to be able to experience the Lied Center, having audio supports, services. We are looking at updating our lobby spaces. There's some traffic there that's not ideal. And also just accessibility with our elevators could be better.

Bill Stephan:

And one of the things that we are planning on doing is getting a new elevator so when you go to the concourse level, there's plenty of space. And so if anyone that's listening to this has been in a wheelchair on our concourse level elevator, they'll know, like, "Oh, I can't wait for them to get a new elevator." And so we're working on some of those things, but I'm so thankful that the University of Nebraska, in building the Lied Center, thought of accessibility in mind when they built it. Certainly, continue to seek out ways that we can continue to make it more accessible and friendly to everyone because it's everybody's performing art center.

Kelley Peterson:

So forward thinking they were when it was built. So, okay, Bill, let's say it's the big opening night of the popular show and the house is packed. Where are you? And what are you doing?

Bill Stephan:

Well, this time would normally be about 7:30, because our shows normally start at about 7:30 PM. About that time, I go backstage and usually I do a welcome to the audience. If I have opportunity, I thank the artists. Some artists don't want to talk to anybody before a show, other artists are super-chatty and love to visit. And so I gauge the kind of interaction that they desire and certainly engage with it. If they want to be private and quiet, I certainly respect that. Just depends on what their needs are before the performance, but it's always nice to welcome artists. Welcome the audience with a brief curtain speech and thanking our supporters.

Bill Stephan:

And then I watch. Almost every show that's in our season, I attend and it's one of the things I just love about my job is the opportunity to get to see that and also to experience and witness the joy and the

impact that these performances have on the audiences, whether it's a girl seeing a dance performance for the very first time at the age of five or someone who is 90 years old and this is the only joy in their lives. It's coming to the Lied Center, it's the break from being at the retirement center where they don't get out much, but they come on a van and they get to see the performing arts and live their dreams and experience something magical. So that's really wonderful. After the show, sometimes you have the opportunity to interact with the artists or have post-show functions. And so yeah, every night is really magical. I feel so lucky to be able to be part of it in many special ways.

Kelley Peterson:

So Bill, you talked earlier about how important words are in promoting something and I'm inspired by motivational quotes because they're words and they're important. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

Bill Stephan:

Sure. I appreciate that question and I thought a little bit about it and my words of wisdom is to fill your life with moments that you'll treasure forever.

Kelley Peterson:

I love that.

Bill Stephan:

Yes.

Kelley Peterson:

Very wise.

Bill Stephan:

Yeah. And to me, that really applies to the Lied Center because many of life's greatest moments in my life, personally, have been being part of performances from greatest artists in the world at the Lied Center. And I think anyone who has attended many seasoned programs and other programs at the Lied Center, you'll fill yourself, your life, your memory with these moments that you can share with your loved ones, with your family, with your grandkids, with your spouse, with your best friend and their memories will last forever. Life is short and life is hard. Why not fill it full of moments that are wonderful and full of joy and beauty and things that you'll remember forever that just like, "Wow, that was one of the best nights of my life."

Kelley Peterson:

Why not?

Bill Stephan:

Yeah. Why not? Absolutely. Yeah. So thanks for asking that question. And I hope that many people that come to the Lied Center are able to say, "That is a moment that I'm going to treasure forever." When they come see Jersey Boys for the first time, that that's a show that just lifts them up and makes them feel good, remember the good times maybe that they had back when Frankie Valli was young and they

were young, as well as just the whole musical experience. Yeah, thanks for that question. And I do hope that many people will find many of the moments that they treasure the most at the Lied Center.

Kelley Peterson:

For our listeners who would like to learn more about your work and how to support you, how can they find out more about the Lied Center?

Bill Stephan:

Liedcenter.org, on the website you can find out all the coming events and programs. Beyond performances, we ask every artist that comes to Lied Center to do educational outreach. And some of those are public and open to the public to attend. Many are with the University and local schools. But you'll find out about the education programs of the Lied in addition to performances.

Kelley Peterson:

Great. As we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work you're doing?

Bill Stephan:

I would encourage everybody to get to the theater, come and see programs and try something new. One of the things that I am always inspired by, patrons frequently share with me that they knew they'd like Riverdance and Oklahoma, but they had no idea about this group called Mnozil Brass from Austria. And they came and they found that it was the most virtuosic performance they'd ever seen in their life and that it was hilarious. And so try something new. You may not have heard of Mnozil Brass before, but they literally are potentially the greatest brass group in the world coming to the Lied Center this spring. And we've been working on having them come to the Lied for multiple years. And so try something new. You may find that it's your favorite event and that it provides you one of those memories that will last a lifetime.

Kelley Peterson:

So Bill, you said something during our conversation today and you said, "Seeing a performance is great because it touches my life." And I like to think about these podcasts as maybe not an episode, I like to think about them as a show. So I want to thank you for touching my life and being our guest today. And I fully believe that the world needs more people and changemakers just like you. Thank you for sharing with us today.

Bill Stephan:

Thank you for the opportunity to visit. It's been my pleasure and hope to see everybody at the Lied Center. And can't wait for your next episode of your podcast. Congratulations.

Kelley Peterson:

Thank you.

Announcer:

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from,

visit KidGlov.com at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.