



Drayton Entertainment To Open New Youth Academy

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – Drayton Entertainment is looking to the future and moving ahead with long-standing plans to open a new **Youth Academy** space that will serve as a hub for the company’s expanding arts education initiatives.

While the organization has been devastated by the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has effectively shuttered all seven of its stages across Ontario over the past 18 months, the interruption in producing live theatre has enabled the award-winning theatre company to plan for its recovery, which includes cultivating the next generation of theatre artists, technicians, audience members, arts advocates, and community leaders.

The resulting Youth Academy will be located at 145 Northfield Dr. W. in Waterloo, with a formal launch date yet to be announced. Building on Drayton Entertainment’s extensive work over the past five years in the area of arts programming and education for young people, the various initiatives developed at this cultural hub will have province-wide reach and directly impact the communities of Cambridge, St. Jacobs, Drayton, Grand Bend, and Penetanguishene, and many points in between.

“Our organization is at a pivotal point in its history. Even though it’s been a very tough time for us, we know that this Youth Academy is an important investment and will help us emerge from this difficult period stronger than ever,” says **Alex Mustakas**, Artistic Director and CEO of Drayton Entertainment. “We see our best opportunity to make a real impact and lasting change in our society through youth education, and in so doing, positively affect the quality of life for the community-at-large.”

By providing training opportunities to youth in the Drayton Entertainment brand of performing arts excellence, facilitated by passionate, professional industry mentors, the new Academy will be a cultural incubator to cultivate community, inspire leadership, spark imagination, and boost confidence in a socially aware, inclusive environment.

The Academy will provide a safe place where youth feel empowered to share their ideas and feelings regarding race, gender, ancestry, language, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, disability, thinking styles, opinions, and life experiences.

A Tuition Bursary Endowment Fund will be implemented to remove the cultural, economic, communication, and physical barriers, which impede participation for marginalized and underrepresented groups, including youth identifying as Black, Indigenous, and/or Persons of Colour (BIPOC), LGBTQ+, new Canadians, and Persons with Disabilities.

“It’s very clear to us that there is a need for more arts education in the various communities that we serve,” says Mustakas. “We want to support the next generation of storytellers and theatre makers.”

Known for their successful auto dealership and substantial philanthropic contributions, the **Willy Heffner** and **John Heffner Jr.** families have provided the space for the Academy. It is conveniently situated adjacent to the Region of Waterloo’s Light Rail Transit (LRT) system, public transit, and shopping, and just minutes away from the St. Jacobs Country Playhouse.

"Simply put, the arts unite people. We’ve seen firsthand how access to and participation in the arts positively impacts a community. We are proud of our history of support for cultural activities, and we look forward to being part of the lasting legacy that this new Youth Academy will create,” says **Willy Heffner**.

Renovations are already underway to transform the industrial warehouse into a 10,000 sq. ft. educational complex with cultural infrastructure to serve the community. The interior is designed for multi-use so that youth may be engaged in a variety of artistic disciplines and culturally-diverse pursuits that foster leadership, creativity, communication, and teamwork. The Youth Academy hub will include rehearsal halls, classrooms, music rooms, and acting studios, plus access to Drayton Entertainment’s adjacent professional Production Centre for the Technical Arts, generating thousands of hours of new arts activity every year.

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About Drayton Entertainment

Drayton Entertainment is an award-winning, not-for-profit charitable organization (12591 1313 RR0001) operating seven live theatrical venues in five unique Ontario locations – the original Drayton Festival Theatre in Drayton, Huron Country Playhouse (Mainstage and South Huron Stage) in Grand Bend, King’s Wharf Theatre in Penetanguishene, St. Jacobs Country Playhouse and Schoolhouse Theatre in St. Jacobs, and the Hamilton Family Theatre in Cambridge.

With over 400 artist contracts issued annually, Drayton Entertainment is one of the largest employers of professional artists in the country – across all artistic disciplines. The organization’s sustainable theatre model has emerged as a powerful force for culture and tourism in Ontario and has been recognized by the office of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario as well as the Ontario Innovation Excellence Awards.

Drayton Entertainment produces 18 productions annually, resulting in over 800 individual performances per season across its 7 stages. In 2020, prior to the onset of the pandemic, the professional theatre organization was on track to reach a paid attendance record of 275,000, with an anticipated economic impact of \$82.8 million, positively stimulating many tourism and hospitality businesses in communities throughout Ontario. The company continues to follow government and public health guidelines for indoor gatherings and is working on reopening plans for the late fall of 2021 or early 2022.