

A Visionary at the Helm:

Don-Scott Cooper Speaks Out About the Present and Future of Le Petit Theatre

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DON-SCOTT COOPER

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

Growing up in a small Midwestern town surrounded by family members who were community leaders very likely implanted the spirit of leadership into Don-Scott Cooper, a gift that has enabled him to successfully manage the oldest continuously operating community theater in the U.S.

As he begins his sixth season as Producing Executive Director of the 107-year-old Le Petit Theatre in the heart of New Orleans' storied French Quarter, Don-Scott's visionary stewardship has breathed new life into the local theatre-going community as well as visiting tourists. The theatre has become, over its historic existence, a showcase for the performing arts, including classic dramas, musicals and comedies, all of which factor into Don-Scott's plans for season offerings.

"I like telling stories," he explained. "It's a time-honored tradition, essential to human civilization. We've been telling stories since early human existence. Theatre is a very old art form, starting with the ancient Greeks and it hasn't really changed that much since then."

But "telling stories" is not all that Don-Scott does at Le Petit. His responsibilities also include overseeing the details and the budgets of all productions, as well as marketing, fundraising and other management functions, including monitoring the work of the theater's staff and the visiting directors.

Describing his own individual preferences, Don-Scott added, "I have a wide range of tastes. I tend to like plays more than musicals. I'm a huge fan of Tennessee Williams. When I was an undergrad I did a thesis project on all of the Tennessee Williams one-act plays and there are dozens of them. I also like Chekov, Ibsen and many other playwrights of that stature."

In keeping with a formula he strives to consistently follow, Don-Scott noted that "Every season I like to do a musical, a contemporary play, an American classic and then something that's wholly theatrical."

This season's offerings are "Let the Right One In" (October 5-22), "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" with an all-Black cast directed by Tommye Myrick (January 11-28), "Beautiful: The Carole King Musical" (March 7-31), "Born With Teeth" (April 25-May 12) and "The Importance of Being Earnest" (June 6-23).

Other special productions are also scheduled for the coming season, including the return of "The Skivvies" on December 19 and 20. The comedic couple, who sing Christmas songs in their underwear and whose act premiered locally last season, said that the New Orleans audience was "one of the best they've ever had," according to Don-Scott.

Over the years of his tenure Don-Scott has racked up a number of "firsts": New Orleans and Louisiana premieres of shows never seen before by local audiences, an achievement for which he takes enormous pride.

Don-Scott's story begins in the small southern Ohio town of Russellville (population 412) about 60 miles east of Cincinnati and "on the tail end of Appalachia," as he described it. One of his cousins served as mayor, another cousin

and an aunt sat on the town council and his mother worked for the local public school system: all important leadership positions in the tightly knit community.

"I couldn't ride my bike too fast through town without somebody calling my mother to report me," he laughed. "Such was small town life."

While attending public school Don-Scott acted in school plays but these experiences did not instill into him a desire to either act or direct professionally. By the time he began attending the College (now University) of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, a loftier destiny began to take shape for him: theatrical management.

Following that destiny, he went on to the University of Alabama to study dramaturgy, the theory and practice of dramatic composition, and he received his Master's degree. Then, while still in his 20s, he



The construction site of The Strand Theatre where Don-Scott oversaw the renovation project.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DON-SCOTT COOPER

moved to New York City and set his sights on Broadway, the mecca of the North American theatrical world.

“As much as I liked dramaturgy, I knew I wasn’t going to make a living as a dramaturge, so I did an internship with a producer there. And that’s the path I chose to follow,” he explained.

Soon afterward he was hired by the Roundabout Theatre Company, the second largest nonprofit theatre company in the nation with ownership of five prestigious theatrical venues, all in Manhattan. Two years after his arrival in the early 2000s, Don-Scott was general managing his first Broadway show, “A Day in the Death of Joe Egg” starring renowned British actor Eddie Izzard.

“It was a pretty quick rise in my career,” Don Scott said. “It was a case of good timing; just being in the right place at the right time.”

“Good timing” also factored into the opening for the position that he filled at Le Petit. Although the theater was primarily dark during the two-and-a-half-year period of the COVID-19 pandemic, Don Scott was able to make some use of the facility, including a music video recorded there by Tank and the Bangas.



In a recent development, Don-Scott hired longtime local theatre veteran A.J. Allegra as Le Petit’s new artistic director. “I am thrilled that after an extensive national search, we were able to find the next artistic director in our own backyard. I look forward to partnering with A.J. as we continue Le Petit’s recent growth and the development of our education and community programs,” Don-Scott said.

Allegra, one of the founders of the NOLA Project, will be taking on a wide variety of responsibilities, including helping with play selection and possibly commissioning new work by local writers, according to Don-Scott. He also envisions Allegra, who has taught at NOCCA and the Lusher school, helping out with Le Petit’s educational programs.

“We now have over 2,000 students seeing matinee shows for free at Le Petit each year,” Don-Scott said. He also noted that a sponsorship for the student program is being actively sought. “Hopefully we’ll get one but until we do we’ll continue offering the free student matinees simply because it’s the right thing to do.”

Wrapping up this interview, Don-Scott shared his observations over the time span he has been at the helm of Le Petit. “The work we’ve done over the last few years has spoken to a broader cross-section of New Orleanians. We’re getting newer audiences, more diverse audiences, and by that I don’t just mean racially and ethnically, but also age-wise. And we’re creating access programs for affordability that have been really successful.



Don-Scott at the “Next to Normal” opening on Broadway with his mentor, Ellen Richard

“New Orleans is an entertainment town,” Don-Scott said. “People here like to go out and celebrate. Theatres are struggling all across the country but we’re actually in a growth period so I’m confident about the future of Le Petit,” he optimistically concluded.”

For information and to order tickets for Le Petit shows call (504) 522-2081. Box office hours are 12:00 noon-5:00 p.m. weekdays and 12:00 noon till curtain time for all productions. The theatre is located at 616 St. Peter Street at the corner of Chartres Street in the French Quarter.



Board member Kathleen Edmundson and Don-Scott Cooper