

## 50 years on, Seattle Children's Theatre offers new shows, more accessibility

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Amanda Norman, a charge wardrobe technician at the Seattle Children's Theatre, shows off a temporary tattoo to people touring a dressing room on Sept. 21 in Seattle. (Nick Wagner / The Seattle Times)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

*Special to The Seattle Times*

In “Havana Hop,” on stage now at Seattle Children’s Theatre, a young dancer is able to grow and blossom when she connects with her roots. It’s a dynamic, joyful play that culminates in a celebratory dance party when the main character faces her fears with courage, creativity and some help from her friends.

It’s a story that could just as easily apply to SCT itself. Like the play’s protagonist, the organization has bloomed over the last half-century by staying rooted in its mission to provide professional theater to children with an emphasis on new works and education.

That focus on its mission has helped SCT get ahead of the curve in its response to the post-pandemic rising costs and fundamental structural deficits that are [radically reshaping local](#) theater. Thanks to its financial foresight and some creative partnerships like [merging box office staff with Seattle Rep](#), SCT is on a stable path at a time when many theater companies are downscaling or even going under. And they’ve managed it despite the fact that many people still don’t know SCT is a professional theater.

“I’ve told my friends who live here, ‘Come see the show — children are not required.’ Everyone here is an absolute professional who is working at the top of their craft. They’ve just chosen to direct that energy toward young people,” said Cessalee Smith-Stovall, SCT’s new deputy managing director and director of belonging and inclusion.

For the past 50 years, its unwavering commitment to young audiences has provided SCT with a road map for increasing kids' access to theater and the ambitious fundraising and partnerships necessary to make it happen.



1 of 4 | Twin sisters Lola, right, and Mili Arthur watch with their mom, Kim, as a Seattle Children's Theatre employee demonstrates a prop on Sept. 21 in Seattle. (Nick Wagner / The Seattle Times)

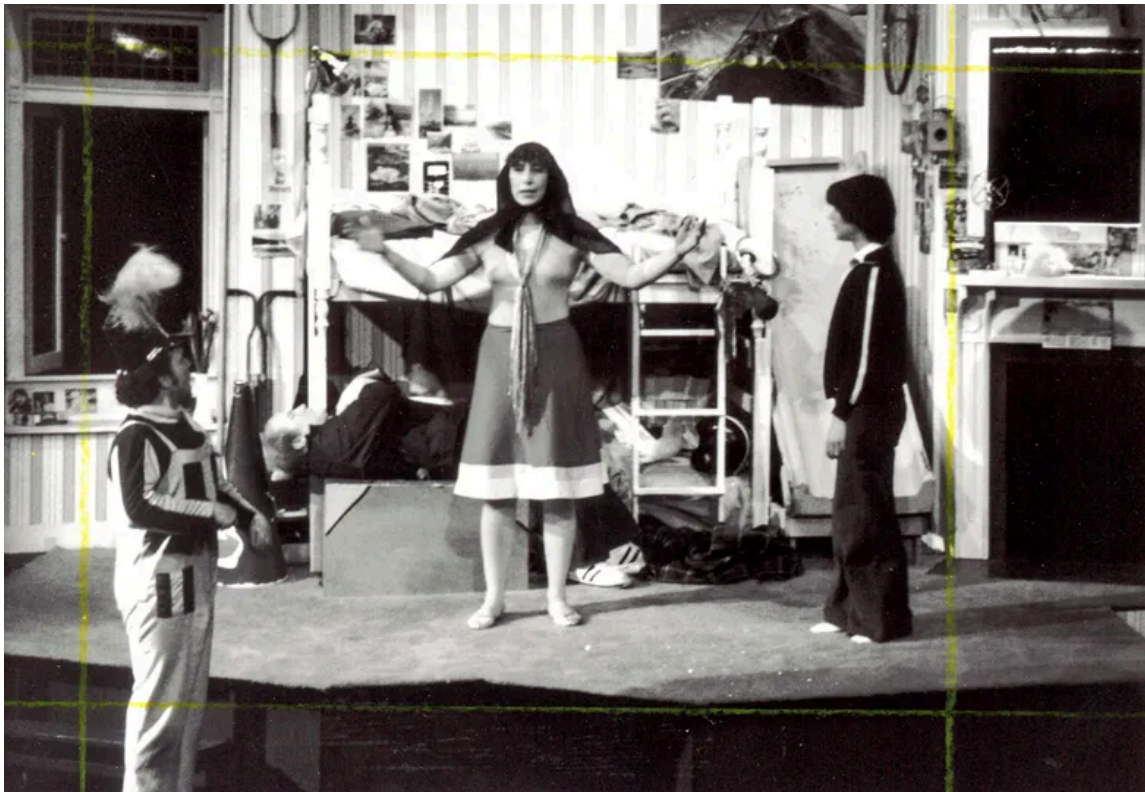
## Expanding access

On Sept. 21, SCT launched its 50th anniversary season with a free community party at its newly remodeled theater at Seattle Center and a nearly-fulfilled \$12 million fundraising campaign. Nearly \$5 million of that went toward a renovation to make the theater more accessible. In addition to refreshing the theater's lobby, the recently reopened space now includes reconfigured wheelchair ramps and seating, new aisle handrails, more family restrooms and a wellness room.

Those physical improvements complement two 2021 initiatives aimed at breaking down barriers to access: pay-what-you-can ticketing and free programming for some Seattle grade schoolers.

Instead of offering various discounts, the SCT For All program now allows customers to call the theater's box office and name their ticket price — “radical accessibility for the public,” said managing director Kevin Malgesini.

Backed by [research that shows kids benefit from exposure to theater](#), SCT's One&Five program offers the Seattle Public Schools' first and fifth-grade classes access to a free SCT show and workshop, including bus transportation. SCT's goal is to reach 50% of classes this year, thanks to additional funding from the [Paul G. Allen Family Foundation](#).



1 of 4 | Actors perform in the play “Step on a Crack” at the PONCHO Theatre located at the Woodland Park Zoo in 1971. (Courtesy Seattle Children’s Theatre)

These programs continue a legacy of expanding theater access to Seattle youth that extends further than [SCT’s 50-year history](#), from Works Progress Administration programs in the 1930s to the city-run Poncho Theatre housed at Woodland Park Zoo. SCT dates its founding to an advisory council formed in 1975 to develop a professional children’s theater. They adopted the name Seattle Children’s Theatre in 1983.

The organization we now know would not exist without Linda Hartzell, who became SCT’s artistic director in 1984. Under her leadership, the theater moved to its current space in Seattle Center and grew into one of the nation’s premier theater companies generating new works for young audiences.

By the time COVID-19 shut down performance venues in 2020, SCT had produced more than 250 plays, including 120 world premieres. SCT was the country’s most reproduced originator of new children’s plays, according to [Theatre for Young Audiences/USA](#), where SCT artistic director Idris Goodwin serves as board president.

## Community connections and new works

SCT leadership knew the theater had to be strategic with its resources while also staying connected to its community of supporters to survive the pandemic and its aftermath.

“It felt like it was going to be a while before we built a new normal,” said Malgesini, who was serving in managing and interim artistic director roles at the time.

So SCT leadership got creative. In addition to its access programs, SCT produced suites of at-home education materials in support of a storytelling partnership with Classic KING-FM and the nationwide [multi-theater collaboration on the digital “A Kids Play About Racism.”](#)

In 2021, the theater also launched its Extraordinary Giving Campaign to support operations coming out of the pandemic and continue its mission of reaching more kids. Since then, SCT has successfully raised nearly \$12 million, which includes a [\\$5.9 million bequest](#) from longtime board member and donor Marilyn Dillard. That money has helped audiences return to the theater with the SCT For All ticketing program and the One&Five school program, while strengthening the organization’s financial safety net.

“The strategy at that time was just staying in touch with the pulse of what was happening in the community. It was really laying the foundation for the way that Idris (Goodwin) was coming into the organization with his vision,” said SCT associate artistic director Johamy Morales, who previously served as the theater’s education and engagement director.

Goodwin [joined as artistic director](#) in July 2022 shortly before SCT’s premiere of his Jimi Hendrix-inspired play “The Boy Who Kissed the Sky.” Two years into his role, he said he aims to have “constant and consistent dialogue” with audience members of all ages to produce plays that help everyone feel like a kid.

Last summer, SCT supported nine separate works in progress, including projects by Keiko Green, who splits her time between Seattle and Los Angeles and received recent acclaim for “The Bed Trick” at Seattle Shakespeare Company; and Indigenous writer and choreographer Larissa FastHorse, best known for the satirical “The Thanksgiving Play.” As part of the [BIPOC Superhero Project](#), SCT is also working with playwright José Casas to develop a play about an uncle learning to care for his nephew.

“I really love that he approached this theme of superheroes in a different way,” Morales said. “Last week we got to hear the play in front of young people in a classroom. When we asked what they thought the main character’s superpower was, a young girl said ‘hope.’ It’s a reminder of why it’s so crucial that we continue to support and provide resources for new work development where young people can also be part of that process.”

## Season 50 and beyond

“We take seriously that responsibility of the way we influence the field and the industry,” Malgesini said. “So, the work has to be good, it has to be relevant, and has to thoughtfully represent the farthest reaches of our nation and beyond.”

To celebrate its 50th season, SCT is offering a suite of plays that they believe meets those standards.

The season opened with the touring TheaterWorksUSA production of “Cat Kid Comic Club: The Musical,” based on the graphic novels by Pacific Northwest author Dav Pilkey. The turnout was so good the theater added two days to the show’s monthlong run which ended last week.

“The voracious appetite that contemporary youth have for those books is palpable and exciting,” said Goodwin. “It’s a way to get a lot of new people in the theater, but also, the piece is ultimately about censorship. It’s an opportunity to talk about that as we’re in this moment of banning things.” (The American Library Association’s [2023 report](#) noted the highest number of book challenges recorded since data collection began 20 years ago.)

SCT’s current production, “Havana Hop” opened Oct. 17. Playwright and performer Paige Hernandez will be working closely with the theater’s engagement team this season, including [collaborating with Seattle Opera on her opera “Stomping Grounds.”](#)

Morales is directing “SCT’s The Snow Queen,” opening Nov. 27, a re-imagining of the classic Hans Christian Andersen story that explores how young people build relationships. The play even helped SCT foster its own relationships through workshops with Western Washington University drama students and public readings hosted by the National Nordic Museum.

SCT’s 50th season continues in February with Gloria Bond Clunie’s “The Hula Hoopin’ Queen” and in March will premiere Goodwin’s “Aesop’s Fantastic Family Fables,” which aims to inspire young audiences to tell their own stories through its interactive structure. Touring production “The Pa’akai We Bring,” created by the Honolulu Theatre for Youth Ensemble, will conclude the season on June 1.

Before “Cat Kid,” ticket sales were just below pre-COVID levels. Ticket sales, however, don’t fully measure SCT’s reach.

“We’re really trying to not assume that all SCT theater must happen in this building,” said Smith-Stovall.

Although the theater has fully reopened post-pandemic, SCT is still working to make live theater more accessible to supporters who cannot physically attend shows. In January, for example, SCT is teaming up with The From-Home Fest to digitally premiere [“Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus.”](#)

Through a combination of grants and contracts, SCT also presents plays and classes at Seattle PlayGarden and King County Juvenile Detention Center and runs drama programs at elementary schools. Education programs account for \$1 million of

SCT's \$7.3 million budget this year and there are plans to double the number of partnership camps and classes in 2025.

As SCT leadership looks to the next 50 years, Malgesini sees the theater's challenge as reaching audiences where they are physically and financially, while also producing compelling shows that still draw them to in-person performances.

The answer, according to Goodwin: "If we are trying to get a multigenerational family like my own to pile into the Subaru and struggle to find parking at Seattle Center, we better really knock their socks off when they're there and give them a transformative experience. We're zeroed in on the power of stories to really electrify people — not just young people but also adults."

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IF YOU GO

**Seattle Children's Theatre**

**"Havana Hop"** through Nov. 16; Eve Alvord Theatre, 201 Thomas St., Seattle; \$20-\$45; an hour with no intermission; accessibility info: [sct.org/tickets-shows/accessibility-offerings](https://sct.org/tickets-shows/accessibility-offerings); 206-441-3322, [sct.org](https://sct.org)

**"SCT's The Snow Queen"** Nov. 27-Jan. 5; Charlotte Martin Theatre, 201 Thomas St., Seattle; \$20-\$50; 80 minutes with no intermission; accessibility info: [sct.org/tickets-shows/accessibility-offerings](https://sct.org/tickets-shows/accessibility-offerings); 206-441-3322, [sct.org](https://sct.org)

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