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ROBERT TRUSSELL

## Coterie Theatre cultivates a new, multifaceted image

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BY ROBERT TRUSSELL

The Kansas City Star

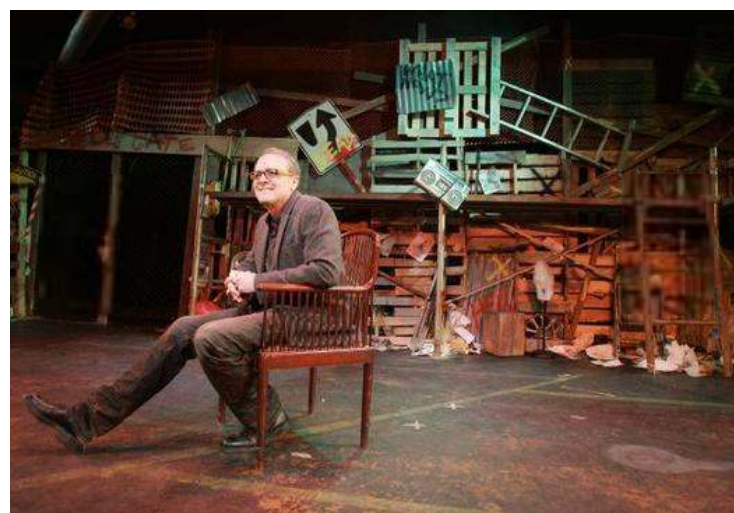
Like most theater companies, the Coterie can trace its long history to humble origins.

Founded in 1979 by Judith Yeckel and Vicky Lee, the nationally recognized company has grown from a no-budget storefront operation in Crown Center Shops to one of Kansas City's established companies, providing employment to scores of actors and other theater artists each year and attracting tens of thousands of viewers during a typical season.

As the not-for-profit company grew, so did its mission. In 2004, the Coterie was named one of the top five children's theaters in the country by Richard Zoglin, Time's theater critic (and former Kansas City resident).

But while the Coterie continues to stage shows for children, it does a lot more. Now the Coterie, one of three live-theater venues in Crown Center, wants people to know it's not just a place to see shows based on fairy tales.

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As producing artistic director of the Coterie, Jeff Church oversees an ever-larger group of activities.

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“The Coterie has a lot of components,” artistic director Jeff Church said. “We have the largest AIDS conversation project in the region. And we do plays for little kids. And we do a series at night for pop culture. That’s a lot of stray parts. Plus, we have a theater school. ...

“You always hope you’ve made yourself and your story even clearer to your current audience and potential audience members, but as you know, the Coterie has always been challenged. People still say, ‘We just thought you did shows for little kids.’

“It’s been hard for people to understand that we’re programming for a very wide range of youth. We start serving kids at 5 and basically go through college age.”

What to do? Take a cue from the corporate sector. Rebrand yourself.

### More information

For more information on the Coterie’s shows, call 816-474-6552 or go to [CoterieTheatre.org](http://CoterieTheatre.org).

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Indeed, the Coterie is the beneficiary of a recent major campaign that includes an improved website, a new logo, a new tagline (“No Small Characters”) and a mobile app for easier single-ticket purchases.

The word “theatre” has been dropped from its name and six programs have been renamed: Coterie Shines (family shows aimed at elementary-school audiences); Coterie Sparks (shows for preteens to young adults); Coterie Ignites (PG-13 shows in the pop-culture series); Coterie Writes (in-school playwriting classes as well as the annual young playwrights’ roundtable); Coterie Acts (education programs, including classes at the Coterie and other locations and an annual touring show that performs at schools) and Coterie Cares (the company’s Dramatic Health Education Project: STDs/HIV, in which actors and medical professionals team up for presentations in area schools).

The rebranding effort began as a discussion between a committee of staff and board members about ways to make the Coterie’s diverse activities clear to the public in a coherent, easy-to-understand way.

“With all our various activities, we were having a hard time bringing them all together under one image or tagline,” said Joette Pelster, the Coterie’s executive director. “We needed focus, and we needed outside help.”

Board member Mike Enos said the discussions “didn’t really start off as, ‘Oh, we’ve got to rebrand.’ It started off as an intellectual exercise. It really started off with how ‘Coterie at Night’ (the PG-13 shows) fit in with other Coterie offerings.”

The conversations led them to VML, a Kansas City-based digital marketing and advertising agency with 17 offices around the world, including one that just opened in Tokyo. Among its clients are Colgate-Palmolive, Coors Light and American Century. VML performed the work for the Coterie pro bono.

Susan Johnson, vice president of the Coterie board and chairwoman of its marketing committee, suggested VML. She and the firm’s president and CEO, Jon Cook, had known each other since college. But Johnson and Pelster said the Coterie planners worked for months on a new vision before approaching VML.

“VML took that vision and really brought it to life in ways we didn’t even expect,” Johnson said. “One of the reasons it was so successful is they came to the shows. They took the time to experience the Coterie first-hand today. ...

“I’ve worked in the branding business for a long time, and it’s very rare that an outside agency comes in and hits the mark right out of the gate. They nailed it every single time. They understood what the Coterie is all about.”

One decision was to scrap the old logo, which had a capital C followed by lower-case letters. In its place is THE COTERIE in all capitals. That led to the new tagline: No Small Characters.

“It answered a basic question: How do we make the Coterie look not childish?” said VML’s creative director, Michael Eppelheimer, who led a team of designers, artists and copywriters. “No Small Characters conveys the idea that it might be for children and teens, but it’s anything but childish.”

Another move was to create a mobile platform. Many people access websites only through their

smartphones or tablets, which have become the preferred vehicle for ticket purchases among some theatergoers.

“That was one of their needs,” Eppelheimer said. “More and more mothers and teachers who are core ticket-buyers are on mobile devices. Mobile access to the Internet is hugely on the rise.”

Cook said VML has performed pro bono work for a number of local nonprofits, including arts organizations.

“We probably don’t quantify the exact number of (pro bono) hours, but I’d say it’s a significant percentage of our labor force each year,” Cook said. “As we’ve grown we’ve always kept a percentage of pro bono work. So as we’ve grown, the scale of what we’re able to do in the community has grown.”

He said it was possible VML could do more work for the Coterie.

“A good recipe for success when an agency works on pro bono is really clear communication,” Cook said. “They’ve been a great partner. There’s been a real respect between the VML team and the Coterie. Now we’ll sit down and talk together and figure out the next chapter.”

The Coterie has benefited from remarkably stable management for more than 20 years. Church became artistic director in 1990. Pelster has been at the company since 1993.

Even before Church arrived, the company staged shows that dealt with serious subjects, such as racism, that could appeal to an older audience. Under Church, the programming has become more diverse and no less willing to tackle controversial issues in plays such as “Lord of the Flies,” adapted from the novel by William Golding, and Laurie Brooks’ “The Wrestling Season,” which dealt with rumor-mongering and homophobia among high-schoolers.

And the company continues to fulfill its basic mission: to reach young people. In the 2011-12 season, attendance came to 76,972. Its education programs reached more than 15,000 students.

Enos said he expected the trumpeted Time quote ranking the Coterie as a leading “children’s theater” to get a little less emphasis.

“It’s still a wonderful accolade, but it’s been some time ago,” he said. “We’re more than a children’s theater. It’s not just people dancing in dinosaur suits. We really wanted to get to the experiential part of it. It’s more than going to a performance. It’s really an interactive experience for young people, whether it’s interacting with literature or history.”

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**Mel Hogan** • 7 days ago

Awesome job on the rebranding. The Coterie is a gem!

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**Kathleen M Isabell** • 6 days ago

I saw their version of The Wiz a couple of years ago, and they knocked my socks off. There were some elementary school classes in attendance and it was a children's delight, but 50+ me had the most wonderful time. They do summer workshops for kids and many other neat things.

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