

**COVER STORY - October 2006**

by Shannon Leonard-Boone

## 'Broadway West'

*In Owensboro, Theater legend Zev Buffman found a quieter sort of showbiz, and showbiz is finding a quieter (and less expensive) sort of town*



Zev Buffman, president and CEO of the Owensboro RiverPark Center, is making a name for Owensboro as "Broadway West," a place where producers can build and rehearse shows for a fraction of the cost of doing so in major cities.

Zev Buffman said he felt like a kid playing hooky from school when he ducked into a free symphony performance at RiverPark Center in Owensboro in May 1993.

Having produced more than 40 Broadway shows and with 27 Tony Award nominations to his credit, Buffman was running 15 performing arts centers across the country at the time. He had been in Louisville with a touring Broadway production when an acquaintance suggested he visit the town of 54,000 and its new performing arts facility.

Buffman had never heard of the town or the center and decided to make the trip. He remembers being impressed with the facility, but was very tired from a busy day, and thought he might even doze off a bit as the orchestra started to play. But as he sat there he became equally impressed with the quality of the performance and the genuine friendliness of the people around him.

Afterward, he walked outside as the sun set over the Ohio River. He leaned on a balcony, alone but relaxed.

“I remember saying to myself, and I know it sounds like a novel, ‘One day maybe I will settle down and find a place like this,’” said Buffman, who’d moved 20 times over the course of his 30-year marriage. “It was perfect to think that thought even for a mere moment.”

He called his wife, Vilma, and said he believed he’d found something they could look forward to – a town to call home.

A decade later, Buffman was ensconced in his busy life once again, living in Palm Springs, Calif., and helping to build a sports arena in Palm Desert, Calif. He was looking through some entertainment industry trade papers one day and saw a half-page ad for RiverPark Center in Owensboro. President/CEO sought, was the gist.

“I saw it all, I felt it all – the sunset,” Buffman said.

He sat down at his computer and responded to the ad via email, joking to his wife that soon they’d be moving to Owensboro.

“She laughed, I laughed, that was it,” he said.

Soon a member of RiverPark’s CEO search committee called Buffman and said they were certainly impressed with his credentials among about 200 other applicants. But, mostly, they wanted to know why he was even interested in coming to Owensboro. He said he didn’t know for sure, but readily agreed to visit Kentucky again to discuss the position in person. He said he was happy to find the facility was not only attractive but well run, and the interview process was casual but organized.

“I got excited,” he said. “This is really cool. These people are really together.”

Buffman said he knew he could make a difference. RiverPark officials believed in him too – he was hired in October 2003.

### **Broadway, without the Broadway scene**

The 72,000- square-foot performing arts and civic center has a 1,500-seat main auditorium, 300-seat multi-use theater, a large plaza for outdoor performances, meeting and reception rooms and the Bluegrass Music Museum. More than 1,000 performances and events are held there each year, and its annual budget is \$2.5 million.

In his first three years at RiverPark’s helm, the 75-year-old Buffman has brought seven national and international touring Broadway shows to Owensboro to build, rehearse and premiere their productions there.



Courtesy RiverPark Center

Owensboro's RiverPark Center

Each show creates \$3.4 million for the local economy before going on to other destinations nationwide and abroad. Buffman said his is a clean industry that generates entertainment, shows and festivals instead of products, but must also be recognized for its economic relevance and ability to attract people from far away to patronize local restaurants, hotels, gas stations and retail outlets.

He's used his Broadway connections to convince producers to come to Owensboro to build their shows, saving 40 to 60 percent on production costs compared to doing identical work in a big city. He's helped ensure not only that RiverPark was technologically up to par, but that coming to Kentucky would be a positive experience.

A local group of volunteers provide actors, producers and crew members with all the information and Southern hospitality needed for an enjoyable stay, from meeting touring companies at the hotel to providing them with goodie bags of local maps, contact people and even cookies. A first-night reception is held for each company with local VIPs welcoming them to town.

As the buzz grew, Broadway insiders began calling Owensboro "Broadway West" and "Tokyo Express." This year "Blast II/MIX," a show produced by Japanese media company Kyodo Tokyo, premiered in June at RiverPark before embarking on its five-month Japanese tour, and Mel Brooks' new North American tour of "The Producers" was built in Owensboro beginning in September.

"Money talks and relationships talk," Buffman said.

Kyodo Tokyo Executive Producer Ronnie Lee said his company spends about two weeks in Owensboro each time it builds a new show, such as the original "Blast," "Blast II" and "Tommy." He said there's no other town that combines a great facility and professional, personal treatment.

"The experience has been 1,000 percent positive," he said. "Zev Buffman is a paragon in the industry both on Broadway and nationally."

Lee said his company has been courted by the city of Fayetteville, Ark., among others, to build its shows and could also have its choice of going to any other major touring city in America. But actors and producers also appreciate Owensboro as a place to work "without people breathing down your necks and the backbiting Broadway scene."

The first show – "42nd Street" – came to RiverPark in July 2004 and quickly sold out. RiverPark Web site hits grew, as did ticket sales from people as far away as Indiana and Illinois.

Each show also creates about 120 local jobs to sew costumes and do backstage crew work, among other tasks, Buffman said. Three or so camera crews are made available to create television and radio commercials for producers to help give them a publicity jump-start.

The state got on board, as RiverPark requested \$500,000 to help launch an International Mystery Writers Festival at RiverPark next summer. The funding was approved by the state House and Senate in the form of \$250,000 grants in June 2007 and 2008 and RiverPark is using more than \$100,000 out of its budget to place out-of-state ads touting the event. The goal of the week-long festival is to encourage writers to submit new screenplays and teleplays and allow agents, managers, studio heads and producers to align themselves with new, promising talent. It's expected to draw 6,000 people its first year alone.

Former Owensboro Mayor Dave Adkisson, who served from 1988 to 1995, is now president/CEO of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce in Frankfort. RiverPark was built during Adkisson's tenure – ten years were spent in the planning phase while a vision was established, land secured and funds raised before opening Sept. 12, 1992. The project cost \$17 million then, which would be \$35 million in today's dollars, he said. For Owensboro, that's no small feat, especially since \$10 million was raised in private funds.

"It has been a tremendous success as a cultural center," he said. "It has exceeded our original expectations – the number of events, the quality of events, the number of visitors have all been greater than we expected."

## **About Zev Buffman**

Zev Buffman first came to the United States about 55 years ago as an exchange student, unable to speak English. He's since produced more than 40 Broadway shows, including the original "Joseph and the Amazing

Technicolor Dreamcoat,” and has worked with Hollywood hotshots including John Lithgow, George Segal, Dustin Hoffman and Elizabeth Taylor. Buffman has been nominated 27 times for Tony Awards, and was the lead founding general partner of the NBA’s Miami Heat. He also helped plan financing and construction of the Miami Arena, and has built and/or managed 15 performing arts centers, four large outdoor amphitheaters and several minor league arenas. He’s created more than 100 national Broadway tours, and presented “In Concert,” featuring Jimmy Buffett, Paul McCartney, The Eagles, Reba McEntyre, Cher, Neil Diamond, Elton John, and Billy Joel. He also presented Frank Sinatra’s last tour, and has raised more than \$700 million during his career for different art and sports projects. He’s served as president/CEO of RiverPark Center since fall 2003, and has since attracted seven national and international touring Broadway shows to build, rehearse and premiere their shows there. The shows then go on to other touring destinations nationwide and worldwide.

—Shannon Leonard-Boone

Adkisson praised Buffman for his efforts to bring RiverPark to the next level.

“Who would have guessed in 1992 that New York would be building their productions in Owensboro, Kentucky,” he said. “I think it’s a great pitch. The community has embraced it. It’s economically advantageous to the production companies. Owensboro could develop a real specialty that brings new dollars into the economy.”

Buffman is bursting with other ideas to bring to Owensboro, including encouraging movie, television and commercial production companies to use Kentucky venues for their shoots. Buffman also spent a number of years under contract with NBC and Universal pictures.

“We have wonderful locations (in Kentucky),” he said. “As a film and television producer I know the need.”

He also wants to bring a fully accredited two- and four-year and postgraduate school for the arts to be held in a four- or five-story addition to RiverPark with classrooms, projection and rehearsal space, and to continue building RiverPark’s reputation in Japan. Buffman said he will encourage all performing arts entities statewide to develop joint productions and other projects to send to regional theaters nationwide.

And on a personal note, Buffman said he’s found other fulfillment by getting to know his neighbors and being able to work without traveling so often, or moving every few years.

“Now we’re more convinced we want to stay here for the rest of our lives,” he said.

*Shannon Leonard-Boone is a staff writer for The Lane Report.*  
[editorial@lanereport.com](mailto:editorial@lanereport.com)