



ARTS AND CULTURE

Congratulations, you have found it – the best kept secret in the Midwest. No one would ever expect a river town like Winona to outclass cities many times its size when it comes to arts and culture, but it does, and then some.

It is a genesis that started several years ago when the newly created Great River Shakespeare Festival hand-picked Winona for its home and took to the stage in a true “if you build it, they will come” fashion. Professional actors from around the country have poured into Winona each summer since, producing theater that rivals that found in any metropolitan market. Word spread, and suddenly people from Rochester and La Crosse and the Twin Cities and Milwaukee found themselves driving to little Winona to take in a show.

Perhaps the festival was the spark that lit the fire, or perhaps it was simply time for Winona’s sleeping cultural giant to awaken, but in any event, the availability of art in all forms has exploded here since. Film, music, performance, and art exhibits fill Winona’s dance card year-round now, and thanks to them this place has been infused with an artsy coolness that is hard to resist.

Today, the Great River Shakespeare Festival stands strong, filling more than 10,000 seats each summer and drawing critical acclaim from far and wide. The mantra of the festival is Small City, Big Drama, but the mission of the festival is to make theater accessible and approachable to all. As such, ticket prices are a fraction of those found in large cities, and the theater company goes to great lengths to bring Shakespeare into schools and coffeehouses and the hearts of people who start out skeptics and end up fans.

Theatre du Mississippi, the Page Theater, and the Performing Arts Center at Winona State University round out Winona’s theater offerings with productions of all sorts, but if theater is not your thing, there is still plenty more to choose from.

The Minnesota Marine Art Museum, an architectural beauty on the bank of the Mississippi River, houses what is arguably one of the finest art collections in the country, due only in part to the Van Gogh, Picasso, Renoir, and Monets that hang there. The collection of paintings numbers in the hundreds and includes an outstanding collection of Hudson River School artists along with many other masters. The works cross a variety of styles and eras, but they have one common thread – somewhere in each scene is a body of water large enough for a boat – hence the museum’s name. The museum also features sculptures, photos, artifacts, a children’s area, and traveling exhibits, and outside of the museum, an expansive patio surrounded by prairie gardens offers an idyllic place to gaze at the Mississippi.

The Minnesota Beethoven Festival rivals any classical music festival in the world, attracting international performers the likes of Yo-Yo Ma, the Eroica Trio, Joshua Bell, and many others each summer. Performances are situated at venues throughout the community, and tickets for the festival are astonishingly inexpensive.

The Frozen River Film Festival offers dozens of regional, national, and international films that are a seductive blend of informative and entertaining, many of them acclaimed pieces that appear at the biggest film festivals in the world. But the Frozen River offerings don't stop there. Workshops, speakers, musical performances, and crowd-pleasers like massage and yoga break areas allow people to immerse themselves in a festival that has become a destination for thousands every January. To broaden Winona's cultural appeal even farther, organizers have partnered with businesses and performers in the community to create Fringe Friday events that fill coffee houses, bars, and storefronts with music, films, and socializing all year.

The Mid West Music Fest is the most recent incarnation of the arts vibe, boasting more than 90 performers spread through every venue in town for a weekend of music each year. Whether you like folk music or rappers, whether you like the smooth sounds of jazz or want to kick it with indie rock, the Mid West Music Fest rolls into town with it all.

Add to that a beautiful, state-of-the-art History Center and new art galleries and studios, and you have cultural offerings so comprehensive they mystify as much as they inspire. No one would ever expect a city this size to have collection of offerings that it does, yet Winona continues to raise the bar on how it entertains itself and visitors who come to play. Given its history of big arts ideas, it's hard to say what will be coming next, but it's easy to say Winona has already made itself the hottest spot for arts and culture for miles around.