

THE ARTS

In the Spotlight

Southwest Florida takes the stage



PHOTO COURTESY OF OLD SCHOOLHOUSE THEATER

For thirteen years, J.T. Smith's lively musicals have been packing a lot of oomph into a little space at the Old Schoolhouse Theater on Sanibel.

IT'S SHOW TIME!

That's becoming the refrain in Southwest Florida, as live theater offerings blossom like a rose bush. It wasn't always like this. Time was—and not that long ago—when live theater was sparse and hard to come by. But now theatergoers can choose from among world and Florida premieres, to Broadway tours, to the tried, true, and still enjoyable.

By Janina Birtolo

LET'S PUT ON A SHOW!

Kudos for the initial impetus toward theater in the region belongs to community theater—those folks who make their living otherwise but love to get on stage and entertain. Among the first of these locally inspired theaters is the Naples Players, which last year celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.

“We are a large-scale community theater that is considered one of the top ten in the nation,” says artistic director Dallas Dunnagan. “We have a national-scale audience that is usually educated and upper-middle class. Most of them are from cities that have strong theater. Our strength is that we can do a lot of things.”

The Players began with one show a year, sometimes in storefronts, sometimes in refurbished movie theaters. Gradually, the season grew, as did the space. Roughly six years ago, the Players moved into new digs—the sparkling Sugden Community Theater on Fifth Avenue South in Naples. The \$6-million

Sugden has two venues under one roof—the 324-seat Blackburn Hall and the 100-seat Tobye Studio Theatre. Today, the Players present seven Blackburn performances, including three musicals, and four



Tobye productions each year.

“The shows are oriented to the space,” Dunnagan explains. “In the Blackburn, we do more popular Broadway favorites, old and new. In the Tobye, we’re more adventurous. Most of the shows are a little more

cutting-edge.”

Second to the Players in longevity is the Cultural Park Players, which began as the Cape Coral Players forty-one years ago. Fifteen years ago, the City of Cape Coral helped the group build the 186-seat Cultural Park Theatre, where the company presents nine shows during the season and one or two more in the summer.

“Most of the shows are comedies,” says executive/artistic director Leo Wolfe. “We have one large musical and one or two smaller musicals and then one or two dramas. We are strictly a community theater, although we do hire professional directors.”

The vast majority of the audience comes from Cape Coral, although the group is making an effort to draw more from Ft. Myers—an easy trip now that the Midpoint Bridge is complete. Wolfe is choosing more plays that he hopes will entice a younger audience; shows like *Durango/Durango* are being mixed with standards like *Plaza Suite*.

THEATER WITH A TWIST

Old standards are not what you’ll find across the bridge at Theatre Conspiracy, which performs at the Lee County Alliance of the Arts. Now in its tenth season (although its roots go back to 1986), this community troupe made its name by offering new and often edgy plays.

“We’ve become known for producing shows other theaters in the area wouldn’t do,” says artistic director Bill Taylor. “We’re not afraid to take chances and stretch our audiences’ imaginations and views on life.”

Case in point is the new-play competition Taylor started several years ago. Last year, it drew almost 300 entries from around the world. The concept proved so popular that Conspiracy regularly produces two or three world premieres a year, rather than the one originally planned.

The other Ft. Myers theater offering something out of the ordinary is Florida Rep, housed at the historic Arcade Theatre in the heart of downtown. When the group formed six years ago, artistic director Bob Cacioppo decided it would be an Equity house.

“Florida Rep is the only fully profes-

sional theater between Sarasota and Miami,” he says. “It’s a sign of excellence. When you use people in the union, you get a greater consistent product.”

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– Bill Taylor, Theatre Conspiracy

As a true regional theater, the Rep draws audience from Sarasota to Naples. Actors are also far-flung. Most come from New York, but Cacioppo is always looking for local talent. The season also reflects its regional status. Last year, the troupe presented a farce, a mystery, a biography, a comedy, a drama, and a musical. Some are hard-hitting, like *Wit* or *Sideman*. Others are more traditional.

“I’m always looking for variety,” Cacioppo says. “I don’t like to do two [of

the same] types of plays in a row.”

Professional theater also has a home on Sanibel Island at the Old Schoolhouse Theater—literally a historic schoolhouse, built in 1896, and later known as the Pirate Playhouse. This tiny, 92-seat theater is known for its lively musical revues—it’s too small to do much else, says artistic director J.T. Smith, whose Encore Productions has been staging shows there for thirteen years.

Although he has not been well recently, Smith writes and directs most of the shows, such as the annual *Ho! Ho! Ho! The Christmas Show* and *J.T. Smith and Friends*, and standards like *Forever Plaid* also take the tiny stage. Smith is typically at the keyboards, accompanying the professional cast he brings in from throughout the country—mostly New York.

His aim is to show his audience a good time and Smith has a loyal local following and repeat visiting audience to his leave-them-high shows. The size of the venue creates some limitations, but what happens when Smith and his friends take the stage is no-holds-barred. “You wouldn’t believe what they do on a small stage,” he says with a laugh.



Naples Dinner Theatre stages mostly musicals.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER ZIEGELMAIER

WOULD YOU LIKE DINNER WITH THAT SHOW?

As if putting on plays weren't tough enough, two area theaters add to the challenge by offering dinner along with the show. The Naples Dinner Theatre has been a landmark for decades, although it's been in the last five years, when new owners Stuart Glazer and Barry Marcus took over, that it has really begun to shine.

Like most dinner theaters, NDT offers primarily musicals—the type of show most desired by its typical audience of snowbirds and groups. But because the actors are recruited largely from New York and signed to yearlong contracts, putting a season together can be tricky.

“When you figure a season, you have to figure the cast's staying for the whole thing,” explains artistic director Michael Wainstein. “This year is primarily a singers' season. Next season leans more toward dance. It's really hard to get both.”

Wainstein is trying to broaden NDT's audience during the summer by expanding on the traditional. For the past three summers, the theater presented special showings of *Rocky Horror*. Next summer, it will produce the rock opera *Tommy*. Wainstein is also bringing in Las Vegas entertainers to round out the summer season.

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comes to shows. Last year's *Footloose*, for example, toured all of the venues. That sharing allows the Palm to offer bigger musicals.

“We will be doing *Miss Saigon* late in the twelfth or early in the thirteenth season,” says Will Prather, general manager. “These mega-musicals play the Mann [Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall] on a regular basis, so the audience is ready. And we feel this is going to be a whole new product line for us.”

The Palm also has the luxury of a second venue—the Off-Broadway Palm, located in the same building. Originally begun as a joint venture with Theatre Conspiracy and J.T. Smith's Encore Productions, this smaller space is now run by the Palm's Victor Legarreta and offers mostly smaller musical revues.

The Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre in Ft. Myers, now in its eleventh season, is part of the Prather family's trio of theaters (the others are in Pennsylvania and Arizona). Having three theaters allows them an economy of scale when it



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

In addition to Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre, general manager Will Prather's family runs theaters in Pennsylvania and Arizona.

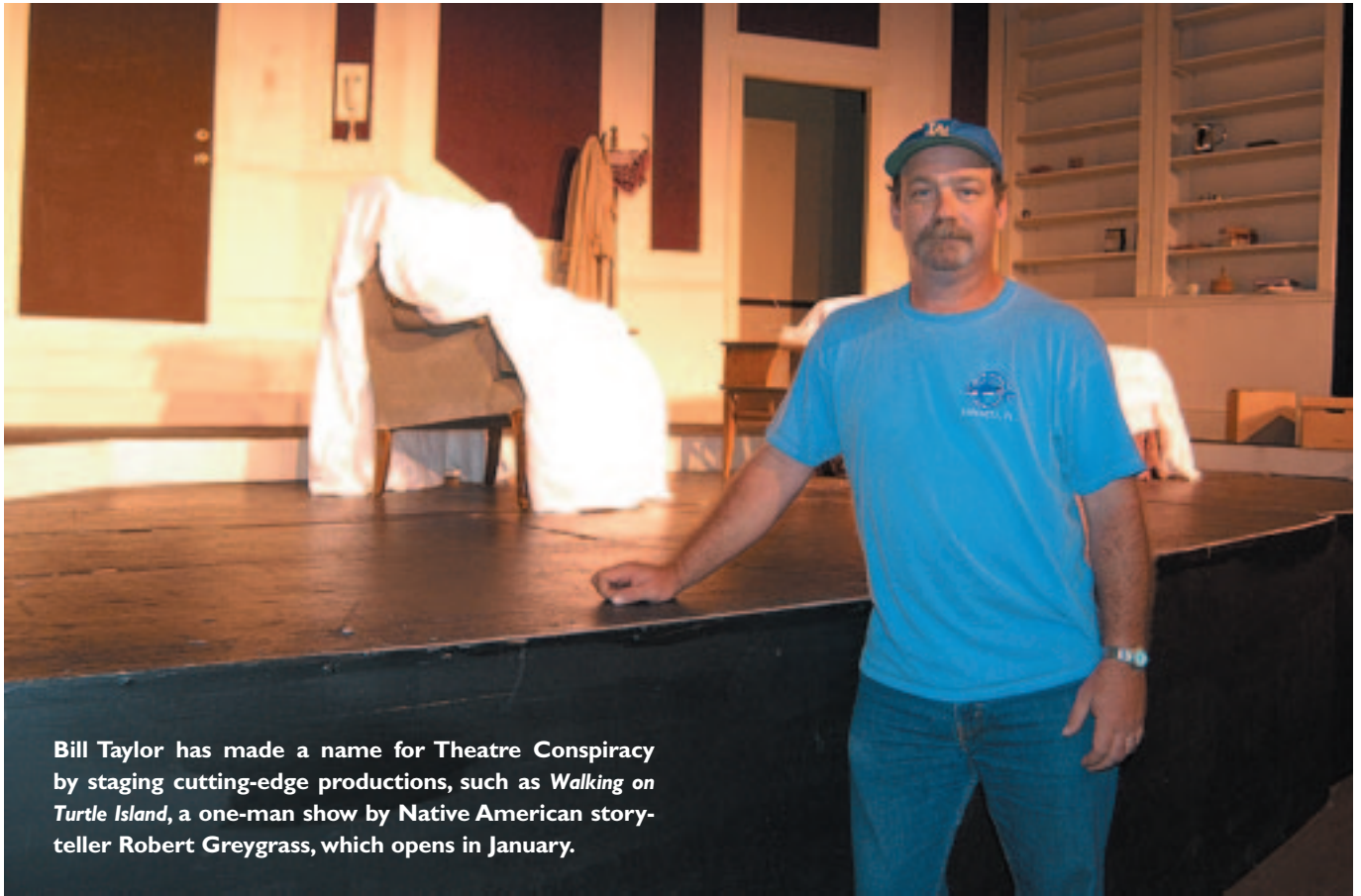


PHOTO BY RHONDA MANDEL

Bill Taylor has made a name for Theatre Conspiracy by staging cutting-edge productions, such as *Walking on Turtle Island*, a one-man show by Native American storyteller Robert Greygrass, which opens in January.

SPOTLIGHT: STORYTELLING TAKES THE STAGE

Long known for presenting atypical fare, Theatre Conspiracy is again taking a risk and offering something out of the ordinary. During the month of January, the theater presents the Florida premiere of *Walking on Turtle Island*, a one-man show written and performed by Native American storyteller Robert Greygrass.

Although of Lakota and Cherokee heritage, Greygrass grew up in urban surroundings in Hayward, California, and experienced many of the problems faced by displaced American Indians. Seeking to turn his life around, he began to explore his Lakota heritage, learning the language, history, and stories, embarking on a vision

quest, and becoming involved with the American Indian Cultural Center.

A veteran of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Greygrass has toured internationally with his original Native American-inspired works, conducted wellness workshops throughout the United States, and worked with at-risk youth on reservations, schools, summer camps, and shelters.

“He was here visiting family and stopped by the theater because he had heard of the work we were doing,” says Bill Taylor, artistic director of Theatre Conspiracy. “I liked the storytelling aspect of the play. This is something the audience in this area hasn’t seen at all.”

In *Walking on Turtle Island*, Greygrass

portrays twenty-one real-life Native American characters, including Tyee John of the Confederated tribes of the Siletz Oregon, reputed to be the first Native American held in Alcatraz as a military prisoner, and Jesse White Toes, a modern-day sundancer who wound up in jail from “too much Crazy Horse Malt Liquor.” The show also includes powwow songs, traditional stories, and a healthy dose of humor.

“It’s just wonderful to see the American Indian point of view,” Taylor says. “It becomes very poignant, but it’s also very humorous. It’s a great mix.”

Walking on Turtle Island is presented Thursdays through Sundays, Jan. 8-24. For more information, call 239/936-3239. —J.B.

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ENCORE: ON WITH THE SHOWS

When the J. Howard Wood Theater closed its doors last year, folks wondered what would become of the prime stage space. But like a phoenix rising from the ashes, this little theater, known as the Pirate Playhouse in its first incarnation, just refuses to quit. And general manager Todd Sherman is betting that the third time around will be the charm.

Now called the Periwinkle Playhouse, the theater began offering shows in November. First up was *Give My Regards to Florida*, a musical-comedy revue by the Naples-based Centerstage Productions.

"We want to create a venue for people who don't have one," Sherman explains. "We want to add to what's already out there, not to compete with the other theaters. This is a unique opportunity that doesn't exist right now."

Sherman is hoping to book such diverse acts as singer Julie Oliver, magician David Kaplan, and local actors looking for a place to perform. "I'm talking to a lot of arts organizations now to see what's available," he says.

No stranger to the playhouse, Sherman served as technical director during its J. Howard Wood days. When control of the theater reverted to the Sanibel Community Association, that group hired him back. He hopes to grow the venue as a true community resource.

"Eventually, we will produce our own com-



PHOTO BY RHONDA MANDEL

General manager Todd Sherman is helping reinvent the venue on Sanibel now known as Periwinkle Playhouse.

munity theater," he says. "And I want to get into kids' shows. There are a lot of people here who miss performing and seeing children's theater. We're also reinstating the dinner-theater concept. We're working with the community association to do that, so folks can have a catered dinner at the center and just walk across the street to see a show.

"This is a community I really liked doing theater for," he adds. "I'm very positive about what's going to be happening" —J.B.

BRINGING IN THE TOURS

Traditionally, recent Broadway blockbusters have required lots of space—and that has meant a big performing arts hall like Barbara B. Mann Hall in Ft. Myers or the Philharmonic Center for the Arts in Naples. These are the places that bring in touring companies of the newest shows, and audiences have been responsive and devoted.

Mann Hall, the largest hall in Southwest Florida, is owned by Edison Community College and run by Professional Facilities Management. A few years ago, manager Mary Bensel took the risk of booking *Phantom of the Opera* into the hall for a five-week run, instead of the usual few days to a week.

"I felt the market had developed so that there was a need in the community to bring a mega-show to town," Bensel explains. "It worked. We sold out. So this year, all our musicals are booked for full-week runs."

An admitted theater aficionado, Bensel is a member of the Independent Presenters Network and president of the Florida Facilities Managers.

As a Tony Award-voter, she gets invited to the new Broadway shows, so she can check out what's available.

Myra J. Daniels, chief executive officer and founder of the Philharmonic Center, is likewise a Tony-voter and keeps a close watch on what's coming out.

"If you're running a true entertainment center, you have to have something for everyone," Daniels says. "In every division, we have tried to do a balance.

Daniels nicely sums up the state of theater in Southwest Florida—and its importance. "Theater is a way of people getting lost," she says. "I think our region has done some good things. It's a wild cry since we opened fifteen years ago. We try to bring to this audience what we feel is the best we can find. And the audience has grown as everybody presents better theater." ❧

Janina Birtolo is a freelance writer and acts in local theater productions.