



Setting the Stage

The Schoolhouse Theater thrives in its new home

by **Janina Birtolo**

Have you heard the one about the schoolhouse that moved across the street? No, that's not a riddle. It merely describes the big change that has come this season for the Schoolhouse Theater.

For years, the well-known theater troupe made its home in the Old Schoolhouse Theater on the gulf side of Periwinkle Way. The group took its name from the historic building it occupied. The 1896 structure originally served as Sanibel's one-room school, where many islanders started their education. In 1964, it was purchased by Ruth Hunter, who converted it into a charming, ninety-six-seat theater. By the 1990s, J.T. Smith had become artist-in-residence, bringing island visitors and residents a succession of original musical revues.

Fast-forward several years. Following the disbanding of its namesake theater troupe, the Pirate Playhouse, a larger

facility on the other side of Periwinkle Way, had reverted to the City of Sanibel and been rechristened the Periwinkle Playhouse. During the 2003–2004 season, it hosted a variety of events, from plays to children's concerts. But the city wasn't thrilled about being in the theater business. And the members of the Old Schoolhouse Foundation (the Old Schoolhouse Theater's governing board) were dreaming of larger digs. It was a case of perfect timing. By August of 2004—just in time for the new season—the foundation had purchased the Periwinkle Playhouse. Soon the company had not only a new home but also a new name—the Schoolhouse Theater.

To shape the company's inaugural season in the larger, more modern space, the foundation turned to a familiar face—actor/director Victor Legarreta. It was another case of good timing.

"I had been with the Old Schoolhouse Theater for about eight years, and then

went to the Broadway Palm as artistic director for three years," Legarreta explains. "The Schoolhouse Foundation was looking for an artistic director for the season and approached a friend of mine, Brian Pia. We had collaborated in the past, and he talked to me about the job. He couldn't make the commitment, but I could."

Originally from Long Island, Legarreta moved to Florida in 1993, bringing with him half a dozen years of experience performing with regional theaters and on cruise ships from Alaska to England. Shortly after arriving in the area, he crossed paths with Smith.

"I worked a lot with J.T., and he schooled me in this type of theater," Legarreta says. "Then I went to work for the Prather family [owners of the Broadway Palm]. Tom Prather approached me and asked me to create a 1950s–'60s revue. That was my first, my baby. And it toured all the Prather theaters.

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