

A Home for the Arts

Southwest Florida's art options just keep growing

by Janina Birtolo

When *Times of the Islands* debuted ten years ago, art was already a staple of the local culture.

There's something about artists and the water—the former seem attracted by the latter. But that didn't mean art was easy to find.

What a difference a decade makes! Suddenly, there seems no end to artistic offerings.

"There are currently thirty-six not-for-profit arts agencies," says Elaine Hamilton, executive director of the United Arts Council of Collier County, "from the Philharmonic Center for the Arts, the Sugden Community Theatre, and the von Liebig Arts Center to smaller groups like the porcelain painters, the Bach Ensemble, and the opera societies. As of January 2006, we had 142 galleries and more than five hundred artists and performers in our database."

And that's just in Collier County. The landscape looks much the same in Lee County, where theaters have opened or built upon their success, where arts events are regularly scheduled, and where the promise of more art offerings is already being discussed and planned. Both the need and the audiences are here. Just ask Louise Senneff, executive director of the Lee County Alliance for the Arts.

"In the ten years I've been here, the place has really changed," Senneff says. "And with Lee County being the fastest growing county, we're right on the cusp of bigger and better things."

The Gulfshore Ballet, she points out, started as a school for aspiring young dancers. But for the past several years, the group's major fundraiser has been Bravo Ballet, a seasonal event that brings in professional dancers from major companies in New York. "That presents a whole different view to this community that it didn't have before," Senneff points out.



The Arcade Theatre is one of many venues at which Southwest Floridians can enjoy live theater.

A similar aspect is presented by the Gulfshore Symphony, an eleven-year-old, all-volunteer orchestra that presents affordable concerts during season, and the older Southwest Florida Symphony, whose chorus was featured at Arts Edition Live, a special arts day presented by WGPU Public Media in January 2006.

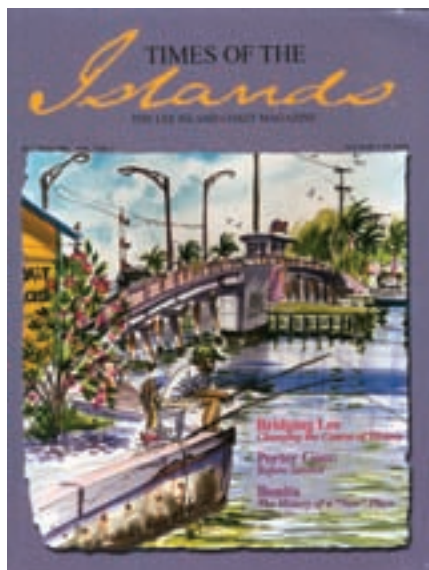
In the world of theater, the picture is equally rosy. Theatre Conspiracy, the

stalwart community group housed at the Alliance, has recently embarked on a quest to present only new-to-the-area works. Some are even world premieres. The old Arcade Theatre in downtown Ft. Myers has found new life as the home of the Florida Repertory Theatre. Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre, approaching its fifteenth anniversary, has started presenting blockbuster musicals like *CATS*, *Beauty*

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and the Beast, and Miss Saigon. BIG Arts on Sanibel has broadened its offerings by presenting dramatic productions. And the Schoolhouse Theatre, having lost its building to historical purposes, found new life in the old Periwinkle Playhouse on Sanibel Island.

Meanwhile, in Naples, the stalwart Naples Players (fifty-plus years old) built a state-of-the-art theater on trendy Fifth Avenue within the last decade. The new venue allowed the group to expand its offerings, with quality to match. Similarly, the Naples Art Association constructed the von Liebig Art Center, which has hosted world-class exhibitions. The Philharmonic Center for the Arts added a superlative art museum. And, like the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall, it has enlarged its offering of



Local artists frequently lend their talents to Times of the Islands' covers. This one, from May/June 2002, features art by Pine Island's Mel Meo.

big-name performers and Broadway shows.

Meanwhile, the Art League of Bonita Springs built a new home, offering classes and exhibition opportunities to local artists. The newly renovated Norris Community Center in Naples prompted the development of new art groups. And a new professional theater company, the Gulfshore Playhouse, is endeavoring to build a theater in Estero.

No doubt about it, the arts scene of Southwest Florida is becoming a thing of beauty, plenty, and envy. In the next ten years, we could well become the place to look for the arts. 🦩

Based in Naples, freelance writer Janina Birtolo has been writing about Southwest Florida for the past fourteen years.

Art Lover

A strong supporter of the arts in our community for over a decade, *Times of the Islands* has published the stories and the work of the artists who call South Florida their home. Here is a sampling of articles that capture the spirit of the "Creative Coast."

"Frontiers of the Mind: An Exclusive Interview with Clyde Butcher," by Thomas Whittingslow. Premier Issue 1996

"The Curtain Rises," by Susan Holly. Winter 1997-1998

"Randy Wayne White," by Barbara Linstrom. November/December 1999

"Darryl Pottorf," by Barbara Linstrom. March/April 2001

"Artist Ikki Matsumoto," By Jill Tyrer. May/June 2001

"Artist Lucas Century," by Barbara Linstrom. July/August 2001

"Art Works at Alliance," by Janina Birtolo. January/February 2002

"A Window on Artist Sissi Janku," by Gwenda Hiatt-Clements. March/April 2002

"Meet Mel Meo," by Jill Tyrer. January/February 2003

"Ballet and Beyond," by Janina Birtolo. March/April 2003

"Sanibel's Myra Roberts," by Amy Fleming. September/October 2003

"Live Theater in Collier and Lee," by Janina Birtolo. January/February 2004

"Cape Coral Arts Studio," by J.G. Samuels. September/October 2004

"Jeffrey Scott Lewis," by Janina Birtolo. November/December 2004

"Artists in Residence," by Barbara Linstrom-Arnold. March/April 2005

"Flights of Fancy," by Dan Tudor. July/August 2005

"Picturing Florida," by Glenn Ostle. November/December 2005

"Art Night on Pine Island," by Ann Marie O'Phelan. November/December 2005

"The Energy of a Good Conductor," by Janina Birtolo. November/December 2005

"33rd Annual ArtFest Ft. Myers," by Ann Marie O'Phelan. January/February 2006



Ikki Matsumoto provided the art for this cover, which contained a story about the talented artist.