



Cultural Heartbeat

Ridgefield's gamble on a new playhouse celebrates 10 years.

Ridgefield's unofficial poet laureate, TV personality Ira Joe Fisher, sprinkles his words artfully as he writes of the "spiritual presence of the playhouse" and notes how often, in the Ridgefield Playhouse's small, crowded lobby on performance nights, he actually hears smiling ticket holders gush, "We love the playhouse."

St. Valentine just might be the performing arts center's patron saint. If the hometown wasn't smitten with its 500-seat theater, how else could the theater have survived a serious rocky patch, and now be in the midst of joyously celebrating a 10th anniversary season?

"In 2009 we were in the red, big-time," says Allison Stockel, executive director of the playhouse. She emphasizes the words *in the red!* *big-time!* as if she were hammering a nail into a wall. Or a coffin.

The economic tsunami that swept the nation threatened to drown the playhouse in red ink, putting it out of business. "We were really hurting," she says. "A lot of theaters like ours closed in '09."

An easy-talking, confident, 43-year-old former TV producer,

Stockel is sitting in her backstage office, behind the door with a wooden name plate announcing: "Rock Princess."

She takes a deep breath—a gesture of gratitude for what she is about to say.

"We made it through."

The knuckles of her right hand beat out a tattoo on a cluttered desktop.

"Knock on wood—we bounced back."

The survival of the playhouse is a huge relief not only for Stockel, but for the town itself.

"If we went away," she says, "there'd be a big, gaping hole in the center of town."

The playhouse is more than just a theater. It's also a magnet that draws customers to Ridgefield's restaurants and shops and has even helped clinch a house sale or two.

"It's become a regional phenomenon, attracting people from all over the tristate area," says town Selectwoman Barbara Man-

The prim and proper façade and tranquil Colonial mural in the lobby belie the lively arts scene within.

ners. "It's become a huge resource that throbs with life and culture."

Manners was the commanding general who for six years led a citizen army that ultimately prevailed over the entrenched opposition, including elected officials and taxpayers who feared that having a new playhouse in "little old Ridgefield" was too much of a speculative financial operation—a bad bet.

"I will proudly take credit for the relentless determination that opened the doors," says Manners. "I wouldn't quit no matter who said 'no.'"

She adds, "Now, 10 years since the theater's opening, some people still tell me, 'The playhouse is your baby.'"

She continues the motherhood metaphor while sharing the credit.

"I'm proud to be its birth mother," she says, "but it's Allison Stockel who has done an incredible job raising the child."

Stockel, who turns back her \$70,000 salary, presides over a full-time staff of four (only two are paid on a regular basis), plus a half-dozen or so part-timers and countless volunteers from the community.

The decor of her bustling office is show-biz chic, energized by an undisciplined mélange of autographed posters and musical instruments signed by artists who have performed at the playhouse.

To Allison, Thanks for the lovely hospitality.
Paula Poundstone

Hey Allison. Thanks!! Kevin Bacon

That theme spreads through the theater's small outer and inner lobbies, where entertainment paraphernalia shares wall space with an eye-catching, museum-quality mural depicting a tranquil, Colonial Ridgefield. The wall hangings and display cases include guitars autographed by Gregg Allman and BB King, a microphone that's signed by the Four Tops, a drumhead gift from Corky Laing of the hard-driving rock band Mountain, a harmonica with Southside Johnny's signature. A gallery of posters—Don McLean, Bo Diddley, Patti Smith, Jefferson Airplane/Starship, Chubby Checker and more—further testifies that variety is the spice of this performing arts center's life.

"In the beginning," says Stockel, "we had eight to twelve live shows a season. Now we average eight to ten a month."

During the September-to-August season there's the proverbial something for everyone: blues, country, rock, jazz, comedy, improv, family theater, children's shows, Shakespeare. There's a women's "health and wellness" program, a National Endowment for the Arts reading program and, new this season—opera. Two new rooftop satellite dishes capture high-def, live performances from the Met—Verdi, Rossini, Donizetti, Puccini and more, 12 operas in all.

Arts

“A panoply of performances is now available, not in New York City, not in Stamford or New Haven or Hartford, but right in our own town,” boasts Ridgefield resident Harvey Fierstein, the acclaimed performer-producer-writer who has been a featured guest at the playhouse.

Although the playhouse can’t be confused with a house of blues, blues joins classic rock as the biggest draws. Blues? In Ridgefield? No one seems to know exactly why it does so well, but it does, drawing a mostly male audience, aged 35 to 55.

Choosing the right acts, the ones that will put lots of fannies in the seats, requires, according to Stockel, “a bit of luck and good timing.”

But luck and good timing need other partners. Chief among them are research and intuition. A prodigious amount of due diligence goes into programming choices. Stockel pores over a multitude of proposals from talent agents; checks out Pollstar, “the concert hotwire”; considers suggestions from area residents; and researches artists’ box-office appeal at similar venues. Then comes the decision—whether her nonprofit theater can, in fact, afford what the talent is asking.

About 60 percent of the playhouse budget is covered by ticket sales. The average ticket price is \$45, running from \$15 for an event all the way up to \$250 for a once-a-year gala that includes wine, hors d’oeuvres and a meet-and-greet with the visiting artist. The remainder of the operating funds comes from a variety of sources: memberships, grants, auctions, contributions and sponsorships by businesses and organizations.

The slow death of the town’s only movie house gave a big boost to the playhouse, whose big screen is a year-round attraction showcasing first-run films, documentaries and programs such as The Director’s Cut Series and The Lost & Found Film Series, which have drawn Hollywood marquee names to town to discuss their craft and interact with audiences. The star-studded list includes Barry Levinson, Ron Howard, Brian Dennehy, Eli Wallach, Cathy Moriarty, Tim Robbins, Kevin Bacon, Frank McCourt, Sam Waterson and The Man from U.N.C.L.E., Robert Vaughn, who didn’t have to travel far. He lives in town.

So too does the prolific TV documentary filmmaking couple, Joe and Sandra Consentino. Joe, artistic director of and driving force behind the Ridgefield Playhouse Film Society, has made more than 350 documentaries, while Sandra has edited more than 250. Among their notable projects are “Family Values: The Mob & The Movies,” and “Muhammad Ali: The Whole Story,” both Emmy

winners. “Family Values” has been shown as part of the playhouse documentary series.

The playhouse itself, with its unobtrusive classic exterior, is tucked away on the broad hill that crests above Main Street, which, in traditional New England fashion, is graced by a score of elegant Victorian homes and a shopping district that refuses to succumb to the chain-store sameness of so many towns.

A short walk from center stage puts you in the town’s historic core, where the brief and bloody Battle of Ridgefield erupted in 1777. Take a right on Main and you’ll see the spot where Benedict Arnold had his horse shot from under him. Take a left and visit the old Keeler Tavern, where there’s still a British cannonball embedded in the wall.

While the playhouse’s lineage does not reach that far back into the American story, it

nevertheless carries its own historic weight.

Built in 1939 with funds from the Depression-era WPA, the hall began life as a high-school auditorium, albeit one with a classy imprimatur—it was designed by Ridgefield’s own Cass Gilbert Jr.—giving it a measure of respect not generally bestowed on a gathering place for teenagers.

Gilbert’s father, Cass Gilbert Sr., who once lived in the building with the cannonball in its side, holds an enduring place in American architectural history, his name gracing some of this country’s iconic structures, including the Supreme Court Building in Washington and Manhattan’s Woolworth Building, which for years was the world’s tallest structure.

The Gilberts also left behind another showpiece in the town where they once lived. The stunning, bowl-shaped, pearl-white

fountain, which marks the intersection of Main Street and Route 35, was designed and donated to Ridgefield by Gilbert Sr.

But arguably it’s the old, abandoned high-school auditorium—rescued, restored and burnished as a cultural landmark because a growing band of residents understood the value of its history and the potential of its future—that has proven to be the family’s greatest legacy in Ridgefield.

“Before the playhouse was up and running,” Barbara Manners says, “out-of-towners knew Ridgefield as ‘that charming little town’ where the schools were very good or there were lots of sports fields. Now, the first comment most people make is, ‘The Ridgefield Playhouse is there, right?’”

To which Manners adds her own exclamation point—“So very, very right!”