Strand Theater Celebrates Senior Arts With First Annual Three-Day Festival

by Victoria Ford



The Island Singers

At the end of June, the historic Strand Theater in Lakewood will host its first-ever Senior Festival of the Arts, designed to showcase and celebrate the abilities of Ocean and Monmouth County senior adults in the areas of visual and performing arts.

"I noticed there was no festival that really paid tribute to their talents," said the Strand's director of development Laura Lella-Smith, who masterminded and coordinated the festival. Recognizing a void in need of filling and drawing upon her extensive professional background in senior-related fields, Smith designed the multifaceted event to revolve around seniors while appealing to audiences of all ages.

The festival's presenting sponsor is Harrogate, a nonprofit, 47-acre Lifecare retirement community located in Lakewood. Other major partners of the theater include Ocean County's Office of Senior Services, Ocean County College's Fine Arts department, the Lakewood Heritage Museum and the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission.

The centerpiece of the three-day festival, which will run Wednesday, June 27 through Friday, June 29 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., is a variety-style revue on the Strand's stage, featuring all manner of talent including performances by vocalists and choral ensembles, tap dancers and instrumentalists, comedy routines, poetry readings, and dramatic and musical vignettes. The variety acts, all performed by seniors ages 60 and up, will take place each of the three days from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and range in duration from five to 25 minutes apiece.

"We issued a casting call," Smith explained, by way of letters sent to activities directors and senior services professionals in Monmouth and Ocean Counties. The casting call enthusiastically welcomed all who would perform in the revue; the only qualification, the notice stipulated, was a passion for entertainment and performance.

A rehearsal was planned for May 7 to allow the registered performers a dry run and an opportunity to acquaint themselves with the theater's stage and technical accommodations.

Meanwhile, the front room off the theater's lobby has been transformed into a gallery space to accommodate the Senior Artist Expo, which will include fine art pieces, about 40 of which are the winners of Ocean County College's 31st annual Senior Citizens Art Exhibit, a collaboration of OCC's Senior Art Advisory Committee and the Academy for Lifelong Learning that ran throughout the month of May. The rest of the artwork on display at the Strand's expo will be submissions from throughout the two counties.

Smith also made sure to extend the invitation to nursing homes and assisted living facilities, so those elderly citizens who might be too frail to attend the event in person could still participate by way of a virtual presentation, whereby artworks or performances could be recorded, stored and submitted on a disc to be played during the festival.

The festival's third component encompasses what are referred to collectively as the healing arts – holistic and alternative pathways to achieving balance of mind, body and spirit – conveying the meaningfulness of the arts in improving overall health and well being.

Representatives from the County's Office of Senior Services, Meridian Healthcare Systems, Kimball Medical Center and Georgian Court University will offer information, literature, presentations and demonstrations each day, with a focus on wellness and lifestyle programs. The Senior Services office will highlight its HealthEASE program, instituted in 2004 and designed to benefit

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senior adults through education and the promotion and support of healthy behaviors. Georgian Court will emphasize its holistic healthcare program.

Professionals will demonstrate practices such as yoga, Pilates, tai chi and reiki massage, Smith said.

Also on the agenda is a daily showing of "Do Not Go Gently," an hour-long documentary directed and produced by Cincinnati, Ohio-based independent filmmaker Melissa Godoy and narrated by legendary retired news anchor Walter Cronkite. The documentary, which centers on the power, imagination, talent and energy of seniors 85 years of age and older, is currently touring the country, Smith said, and the Strand is proud to be a stop on its nationwide tour.

Among other highlights, the dynamic and always-entertaining Anthony LaGruth, artistic director and conductor of the Garden State Philharmonic, will deliver a talk titled, "The Role of Symphonies and Cultural Institutions in Creating Stronger Communities."

On Friday, a creative writing workshop will introduce seniors to the process of writing their memoirs and address important (at times, difficult) choices a writer must make when distilling a lifetime of experiences into an organized and engaging record of personal history.

"I think it's important to integrate them into the arts," Smith said of the festival's underlying purpose.

Indeed, with such a unique and diverse blend of activities and opportunities, the event promises to be a one-of-a-kind senior extravaganza, honoring an entire generation of people who, in so many ways, help to shape the community in which they live.