

# Broadway at the Beach: A Brave New Season at Surflight Theatre

There's no shortage of good reasons to make the drive to Long Beach Island, Ocean County's 18-mile expanse of clean beaches, fine dining and recreation along the shore. But what better reason to visit the beach this spring and summer than for a taste of Broadway? Good news - Beach Haven's Joseph P. Hayes Surflight Theatre is just the place to satisfy the craving.

With its new "Broadway at the Beach" marketing strategy and a delightfully fresh variety of shows lined up for the upcoming season that officially begins May 28, Surflight celebrates 56 years of entertaining, amusing and impressing the socks off of audiences of all ages and from all over the region.

Group sales director Ruth Blankmeyer explained that the striking image of red tap shoes lying in the sand against a washed-out backdrop of dune grass, ocean and sky is carried through much of the company's advertising this summer in an effort "to brand the theatre" and to create a recognizable and lingering mental connection between performance art and Long Beach Island.

As the sole person responsible for selling and orchestrating Surflight's group ticket packages and one of the core full-timers who keep the Surflight "burning" year-'round, Blankmeyer is an invaluable resource to anyone wanting to learn more about the 450-seat theatre's offerings - she is especially attuned to the needs and preferences of older theatergoers.

In the interest of keeping things simple, she said, "I'm the only person they need to talk to."

Many of the groups that Blankmeyer organizes are comprised of senior citizens, she said, listing several retirement communities, two Jewish Community Centers and a few chapters of the Red Hat Society, many of whom seem to enjoy the more traditional, musical shows, accompanied by meals at some of the more upscale local restaurants such as Harvey Cedars' The Plantation, Ship Bottom's Bayberry Inn and Beach Haven's Sweet Vidalia.

"The tried-and-true Broadway musicals always do well," Blankmeyer said. Case in point, last summer's production of "Cats," she said, was the biggest seller in the theatre's history.

Special rates apply to groups of 15 or more, with packages that include a matinee or evening performance only; a matinee preceded by lunch or followed by dinner, or an evening show after dinner, at one of 12 participating restaurants; Sunday brunch at the Quarter Deck Inn in Ship bottom followed by a matinee; or dessert and espresso at Café Bacio in North Beach Haven after an evening show. In general, she said, she finds that groups tend to prefer matinees to evening performances.

Group packages account for "a big chunk" - more than a quarter, actually - of the theatre's total ticket sales for MainStage Productions; last year between June and December, she said, the theatre hosted 325 groups, totaling more than 12,000 people.

While transportation is, for the most part, left up to the groups themselves to arrange - many charter the trips, carpool, or take advantage of the affordable, comfortable, county-run Ocean Ride system, she said - Blankmeyer can refer groups to two local charter bus companies, Classic Tours and Trolley Tours upon request.

The theatre is fully handicap-accessible, with graded, ample, barrier-free entryways, aisles and restrooms that accommodate wheelchairs, walkers, canes and crutches. Large-print programs are available and hearing-impaired accommodations can be made in advance by calling the box office.

The 2005 season officially kicks off with the annual "Meet the Surflighters" gala, scheduled for May 28 and 29 at 8 p.m. Blankmeyer described the event as "a sampler" - an opportunity for people to come and see little bits and pieces, including musical numbers, from each of the upcoming season's shows. Following the program, guests are invited to join the cast and crew for a festive social gathering on the outdoor patio that usually draws a crowd of about 300, she said. "It's like a reunion," according to educational outreach director John Bow, who also runs the "Surflight on the Go" touring educational theatre company, the children's theatre program and the adjoining Showplace Parlor. "It's a start to the season for us, and a chance for (the patrons) to see what they're in for," he said.

Tickets for the gala are \$25 and may be purchased in advance by calling the theatre at 492-9477 or by stopping in for details.

In the next couple of months, patrons can enjoy stage, screen and TV star John Davidson's return to Surflight in the role of widowed father and farmer Charlie Anderson in "Shenandoah," running June 1 through 19 and, beginning June 21, the classic and comical musical production of "Me and My Girl," through July 10.

Beginning June 22, Children's Theatre productions run Wednesday through Sunday at 6 p.m. every week through mid-September, with no-reserved seating available. Bow directs and writes the scripts and song lyrics for all of the children's shows, with music by Andy Einhorn, which are popular among grandparents and their grandchildren, he said. "Little Red Riding Hood," added to the schedule last year according to Bow, gets the 2005 ball rolling the fourth week in June, followed by "Snow White" (June 29 - July 3) and "Mary Poppins" (July 6 - 10). Later in the summer, the program will include a new telling of the classic "Cinderella" story.

Those already familiar with Surflight may be pleasantly surprised to find some interior changes and improvements were made over the course of about ten weeks this winter. On a guided tour of the premises with Blankmeyer, Out & About met facilities manager Bruce Schnepf, who was putting some finishing touches on the lobby area.

It took him about six weeks, he said, to renovate the lobby; the walls, previously painted a light shade of yellow, have been redone in a warm mauve and burgundy color scheme, to match the new swirling, flowery patterned carpeting. Schnepf has also applied a new coat of urethane to the ceiling, changed the lighting over to longer-lasting and more efficient fluorescent bulbs and installed new window treatments, not to mention the smaller details, including sconces, countless brass fittings and other accents.

"The little things you don't even notice as you look around have changed," he said. Four additional weeks were spent on plumbing repairs and re-wallpapering in the men's and women's restrooms, now clean as a whistle and looking and working like new.

"I've been busy," Schnepf understated. Busy, indeed. And thus, a new chapter in Surflight Theatre's exciting history book begins. To learn more about the organization's past, present and future, visit [www.surflight.org](http://www.surflight.org).

- Victoria Ford

