83-YEAR OLD HISTORIC STRAND THEATER LOOKS AHEAD

New and exciting things are astir at the historic Strand Theater in Lakewood, the 83-year-old performing arts institution, veritable cultural hub of Ocean County and, on October 15, host of the Garden State Philharmonic's Golden Opening Night Gala in celebration of its 50th anniversary.

"We welcome them with open arms," Strand executive director Theresa Beaugard said of the Philharmonic, with which the Theater has maintained a lengthy and continuous relationship. "They enjoy and appreciate the space, (and) they bring a degree of class to this venue that only a philharmonic orchestra can. ... Their quality is superior."

Newly added to the Strand Theater's management structure is the position of artistic director held by Jan Topoleski of Brick, who heads up the Community Theater Program, an endeavor to stimulate the growth of theater arts in the community and arts education among youth. The program encompasses a seven-show season including two dinner theater productions in the Gallery, Strand Youth Community Theater productions and a two-week Summer Youth Workshop.

"Jan's being here meets a very specific goal in our long-range (mission) of bringing consistent, ongoing, quality performances to the Theater," Beaugard said. Moreover, "quality follows quality," she continued, "and the people who follow this man are amazing." People who truly care about productions, she said, know that Topoleski cares just as much, and they just seem to flock to and surround him. As a result, "he takes these shows beyond the level of Community Theater."

Topoleski said his main objective in doing any show is "to make it look as close to Broadway as I can" and that he feels fortunate to work with such dedicated and talented volunteers who want to be involved.

"So many people who make it possible to mount these shows," he said, "do it for the love of theater, and do it for free," or what he calls "sweat equity."

The artistic director position was created this past spring, Beaugard said, as a way to move the Strand Theater forward into the next phase as it relates to the organization's meeting its long-term goals and, specifically, the development of educational programs.

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Even with its sights confidently set on the future, the thriving, magnificently restored and renovated Strand Theater of today represents a long, rich - and, for a brief period, rocky - past.

At the time of its inception in 1922, the Strand showed silent films and vaudeville acts and served as a "tryout theater" for Broadway producers. As times and technology changed, variety acts gave way to motion pictures. Once cineplexes had cropped up and gained widespread popularity and televisions had moved into American living rooms, the Strand began to struggle to attract audiences and nearly met its demise after a short, desperate stint as a "porn house" in the '70s. Thankfully, it was eventually saved, preserved by the County and listed on the state and national Registers of Historical Places and later purchased by its current owner, the Lakewood Development Corporation and occupied by the non-profit organization known as Strand Ventures, Inc.

In 1992, a significant sum of grant money, in addition to financial support from private individuals, businesses and agencies on the local, county and state levels, enabled the start of the theater's full structural and cosmetic restoration, which has included a new





façade, box office and Reception Gallery, in keeping with the building's original design (in distinguished shades of mauve and cornflower blue, complemented by faux gold and marble) but updated with impressive technological advances and in accordance with the handicap accessibility standards as set forth by the Americans With Disabilities Act.

During a recent visit to the theater, Out and About was granted by Topoleski a personally guided tour of the facility and a glimpse at the inner workings of one of the area's most important historical and cultural entities. Inside the 1,000-plus-capacity theater, the summer workshop, which focuses on dance and movement, voice instruction and acting and improvisation, was in full swing, as youngsters bustled about onstage under the direction of dance instructor Denise Danielli.

Topoleski said the Strand is "unique in that it's a completely raked theater," referring to the stadium seating layout and absence of mezzanines, which makes for ideal sound dispersion and creates none of what are called "acoustical pockets."

"All the sound you're hearing now," he proudly pointed out, "is coming from a speaker all the way in the back of the stage."

Boasting some of the nation's best acoustics, the theater is well suited to the Philharmonic, with which it has partnered in its efforts to foster young people's appreciation for and participation in the performing arts. In August, the Strand Youth Community Theater presented "Cinderella" with the accompaniment of 15 hand-selected members of the Philharmonic's Symphonic Youth Orchestra for high school-aged musicians.

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Topoleski described the partnership as "a nice team-up" that joins "the best of our youth and the best of their youth" in fully mounted productions and, ideally, inspires in the participants a lifelong love of musical theater.

"We have particularly structured our program this year to family entertainment with a wide appeal and a broad target audience," he said, keeping younger audiences' tastes in mind as much



as the preferences of the senior citizens, who comprise such a large segment of the community. Beaugard said more than half of the Strand's regular patrons are seniors, who serve as a good constant, while the theater continues to grow and expand in an effort to reach and serve the community. Additionally, she said the Strand strives to overcome a certain stigma she feels is attached both to theater and orchestral music; to create an atmosphere that is comfortable and accessible; and "to find new ways to open the doors to those who have not experienced the arts."

Beaugard credited the success of the Theater and Philharmonic's "great working relationship" to the organizations' shared goals.

"We're basically here for the same reason - to support and present the arts," she said. "When you have two great entities working together, you can't go wrong."

For more information about the Strand's programs, shows and discounted season package rates, contact the Theater at (732) 367-7789 or visit www.strandlakewood.com.