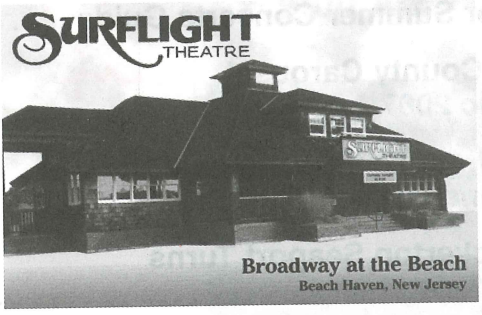
Surflight Theatre Gears Up For A Star-Studded Season

by Victoria Ford



At the Surflight Theatre in Beach Haven, Long Beach Island's reigning "Queen City," the company is assembled, the housing is readied, and the calendar is chock-full of sure-to-please productions. Producing artistic director Steve Steiner and development director Sandy Golds-borough could hardly contain their excitement about all the dramatic delights in store for theatergoers this summer.

For one thing, Goldsborough said, "we're coming off a record season" in which "72,000 people came through our doors last year," reflecting a 9 percent increase in attendance over the previous year. Additionally, 2007 marks the first time in Surflight's history that the theater has hosted at least one event in each month of the year. The summer's lineup includes some exciting musical concerts by world-class, in some cases legendary, performers.

And, in July, the theater will embark on an all-new fundraising project to the effect of an online auction. Among the items to be put up for bid, according to Goldsborough, is immunity from being called upon to perform at the Surflight's next-door Showplace Ice Cream Parlour.

The theater is also highly anticipating the completion of its brand new, three-story cast house, expected to be ready by June 15. Because the company would arrive May 14 and would need accommodations for about four weeks until the new space was ready, the theater's neighbors Mark and Joanne Spulock offered to provide temporary housing for the actors at their European-style bed and breakfast, the Island Guest House.

Surflight patrons can have a hand in furnishing the new cast house by shopping at the Boscov's department store located in the Ocean County Mall in Toms River. A special gift registry has been established there for anyone interested in donating furniture, appliances, linens or any of the myriad household necessities. The registry is available for viewing and download at http://giftregistry.boscovs.com (click on "Give a Gift," enter the word "theatre" as the last name and then click "Search"), but actual purchases must be made either in-store or by calling Boscov's representative Joan Feldman at (732) 505-0770, ext. 1289.

In March, Steiner returned energized from his travels to New York, N.Y., Boston, Mass. and Myrtle Beach, S.C., where he auditioned, all told, 1,700 actors. That number was then narrowed to 150 and again to the final 25 who would form the Surflight's company, in whom Steiner expressed the most enthusiastic confidence.

The Mainstage season opens May 30 with the classic rags-to-riches tale "Kismet," running through June 10. "Kismet" is part of the American Masterpieces series,a three-year initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

Next up, from June 13 through July 1, is New Jersey's professional premiere of the stage version of "Thoroughly Modern Millie." The show is "a high-spirited musical romp" filled with "madcap merriment" starring Ashleigh Davidson, daughter of John Davidson,

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who returns to Surflight later in the season.

Hot on the heels of "Millie" comes the biblical-saga-cum-musical-parable, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," a family-friendly, universally relatable story of Joseph's struggles to overcome adversity and misfortune, set to the music of Andrew Lloyd Weber. "Dreamcoat" runs July 3 through July 22.

Following "Joseph" is the 21st-century retelling of "Aida," Giuseppe Verdi's timeless story of loyalty, betrayal and forbidden love. The remake was written for Disney by Elton John and Tim Rice and ran on Broadway for more than four years, Steiner said. It comes to Surflight from July 24 through Aug. 12.

Then, from Aug. 14 to 26, Surflight presents "1776," with its cast full of many familiar local faces. The show is also timed to coincide with the 225th anniversary of the Battle of Cedar Bridge and other Revolutionary battles being commemorated this year, about which "(Stafford Township Historical Society president) Tim Hart has been after me for two years," Steiner good-naturedly remarked.

Many of the actors who performed in Surflight's last production of "1776," in 1999, will reprise their roles this time around, including local clergyman Frank Crumbaugh as Benjamin Franklin and Rick Mellerup as John Hancock. Beach Haven mayor Tom Stewart will make a welcome addition to the cast, playing the part of Joseph Hewes.

"He has a real love for this show," Steiner said, which is a depiction of how the country's Declaration of Independence came into being.

Running from the end of August through the first two weeks of September will be "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," a musical farce starring John Davidson and a fair amount of misunderstandings, mix-ups and mayhem.

Between Mainstage productions, there are special events not to be missed, the first of which is a concert by Australian-born finger-style guitarist Tommy Emmanuel on Monday, June 25 at 8 p.m. Emmanuel and his "unbelievable" talent have sold out his previous two appearances, so all interested concertgoers are advised to secure their tickets early.

The very next week, Surflight is pleased to present the celebrated "musicomic" duo the Smothers Brothers for two performances on Sunday, July 1 and Monday, July 2, both shows at 8 p.m.

Due to the overwhelmingly positive response last summer after the theater hosted its first-ever standup comedy night, there will be two separate comedy nights this year. The first is scheduled for Monday, July 9, and the second for Monday, Aug. 20. Both are courtesy of a standup comic and native New Jerseyan named Joe Bublewicz – "Joe Bub," to friends – who delivers an evening of sidesplitting laughter along with two of his fellow comedians, yet to be determined.

In a kind of 1950's pop and R&B resurrection, the Coasters, the Platters and the Drifters combine musical forces on the Surflight stage Monday, July 16.

Finally – drum roll, please – see none other than America in concert at the Stafford Township Arts Center on Sunday, Aug. 19. Surflight is producing the concert but will borrow STAC as its venue, located at the end of McKinley Avenue in Manahawkin, to host the 1970s folk rock superstars.

But, even come mid-September, the fun is far from over. Through October and November, "They're Playing Our Song," "The Miracle Worker," "Driving Miss Daisy" and "Arsenic and Old Lace" give theater patrons plenty to look forward to as the months turn colder.

Additionally, a new, original musical work titled "Silver Dollar" by Broadway director Scott Schwartz debuts in late October. In a mountaintop cabin on the American frontier unfolds the story of the life and loves of farmer and prospector Horace Tabor. And, lastly, bringing 2007 to a close is "It's a Wonderful Life," a generations-old favorite that continues to bring out the best in audiences year after year.

For all the details about upcoming shows, ticket information and ways to support the theater, visit www.surflight.org.