



New Arts Venue STACs Up

by Victoria Ford

The long awaited, highly anticipated \$11.8 million Stafford Township Arts Center in Manahawkin celebrated its grand opening weekend March 18 and 19, with performances of music, dance and comedy in the Center's state-of-the-art OceanFirst Theater.

Take the first weekend's lineup as a clue to the variety and caliber of entertainment in store for visitors to the venue that's so brand-spankin' it still has "that new car smell": On Friday, the theater hosted a meet-and-greet reception fundraiser followed by an evening of romantic song with singer-songwriter-pianist Jim Brickman; on Saturday, the leaping, swinging, twirling antics of the Russian-American Kids' Circus on Stage; and Sunday night, the sharp-witted, tell-it-like-it-is humor of comic and talk show host Joy Behar of ABC's "The View."

In the months to come, The Garden State Philharmonic, the New Jersey Ballet, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, the Starbound National Dance Competition,

and the Island Singers will also grace the stage. In June and July, through an agreement with the Stafford Township Historical Society, the STAC will offer a 13-week series of free concerts on Monday nights featuring magic, storytelling and other delights.

Out & About recently had the privilege of a guided tour of the facility with the Center's charismatic executive director Robert B. Watson of Toms River, whose background in marketing, advertising and public relations makes him more than familiar with the right strategies for launching a successful venture. The goal is to offer a large variety of acts appealing to all ages, he said, rather than to become known simply as, "oh, that's the place you go when you want to see the ballet," for example.

"We're booking into the middle of '07 right now," he said. Watson's input in everything from programming to color schemes played an important role in the nearly three-year

process, from vision (2003) to construction (2005) to completion (in February).

With its multi-faceted mission to enrich, educate, entertain and inspire the children and the community it serves, the STAC represents both journey and destination: The long road to its opening has led to the fulfillment of a vision that (literally) bridges the physical gap between the McKinley Avenue Elementary School and the Stafford Intermediate School and provides students in grades 3

ly find themselves working with a space with many times more conducive to learning and growth than the previous multi-purpose room, which Watson lovingly referred to as the "cafe-gymatorium."

"The kids, when they came in here the first day, I think they were awestruck for the first little while," drama teacher Caitlin Gioe of Manahawkin recalled. "We're working on projection," she said of how she and her students are adapting to the new, much larger space. Seemingly ironic, she remarked,

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through 6 with a space in which to explore the performing arts, express themselves and stretch their creative legs.

First and foremost, Watson explained, the STAC is a resource for the Stafford Township School district, which owns and uses the facility for instruction, student theater productions and rehearsals, concerts, awards assemblies and other educational purposes. As such, its realization is nothing short of thrilling – not only to the students who get to use it, but also for the teachers of music, drama and dance, who sudden-

to be teaching already young, energetic kids to carry their voices out and into the house from the 3,675-sq.ft. stage. She is equally excited about the "huge storage space" for props and other materials and about the fact that "there is so much more we can do, now."

Gioe, along with musical director and vocal teacher Tracey Tylicki and choreographer and dance instructor Ashley Gilly, was getting ready to direct a rehearsal for the school musical "Annie," which allowed for parts for all 200 students in grades 4

through 6 who wanted to participate.

As the students began to trickle into the theater at the end of the school day, Watson commented on how wonderful it is that they are encouraged to take part in all elements of a production, be it the dramatic, artistic or technical, "whatever their passion is – and as many times as their passion changes."

The Center's day-to-day operations and outside programming are overseen and managed by the Stafford Township Education Foundation, which lends financial support and discovers and develops partnerships that "provide experiential programs to extend lifelong educational opportunities," according to its mission statement. One such partnership is with the Southern Ocean County-based Our Gang Players theater troupe; another is with Beach Haven's Surflight Theatre, with whom Watson has worked closely to ensure a long and mutually beneficial relationship between the two institutions. He sees the Surflight as just about the farthest thing from a competitor – to the contrary, he expressed on behalf of STAC the utmost admiration and gratitude.

In fact, he continued, without the groundwork the Surflight has laid for so many

years in terms of awakening the public's sense of appreciation for the performing arts, "we wouldn't even be off the ground."

Both Steiner and Stafford Township Mayor Carl Block have expressed their enthusiasm for the new facility and the importance of providing a venue for performing arts and other cultural events, which not only attract entertainment-lovers to the area but also satisfies the need felt by those who are already here.

"It's bringing money to Manahawkin and keeping it in Manahawkin," Watson said of the tourism dollars visitors are bound to spend, to which end he said an idea is currently in the works to offer "see, stay and eat" packages.



The evidence is already making itself known: The Star Power Dance Competition, which drew a whopping 464 entries and took place the weekend of March 10 through 12 brought so many out-of-towners to the neighborhood, he said, that the new Holiday Inn on Route 72 was booked to capacity for the first time since it opened Oct. 6, and the Shop Rite down the street sold out of flowers.

As a community resource, the STAC is also proving itself a vehicle for volunteerism. Watson got a staggering response, he said, from the residents of the Perry's Lake retirement community on

McKinley Ave.; he had gone to one of their meetings to introduce himself and to offer volunteer opportunities, hoping to sign up maybe 20 or 30 people who were interested in helping out. To his pleasant surprise, more than 200 volunteered, for everything from greeters and ushers to concessions, box office and parking attendants.

The keystone of the STAC, of course, is the theater, with its 800-plus plush seats and the fully automated, cutting-edge technology it employs for optimal lighting and sound (thanks to support from the theater's namesake in the amount of \$500,000), its physical accessibility and hearing-impaired-technology, its ample storage space and its newly installed video portion, which includes two 10-ft. drop-down screens and live feed capabilities for viewing the stage from the lobby and dressing rooms. But another important element of the facility is the 14 new classrooms, two music rooms and dance studio utilized every school day.

Of his ultimate vision for the venue's future, Watson said he would love for it to become a force to be reckoned with on the state level amongst the likes of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark and the State Theatre in New Brunswick – "that would be quite an honor," he said – but what remains the most meaningful to him about the whole project, he said, is the commitment to the kids and the opportunity it gives them to



Executive Director Robert Watson on stage at the OceanFirst Theater. Photo Credit Ryan Morrill

experience what so many others cannot.

He marveled at the spirit the students demonstrate and the social skills they develop when they are encouraged to act and be themselves and participate in their surroundings.

"It's cool to see it at such a young age," he said. "And you start to realize that the work you've done here has started to affect them."

For more information about upcoming events or to purchase tickets, view seating availability and more, visit the STAC's web site, www.njstac.com or call (609) 489-8600.

