

Cultural Organizations Receive Award for COVID Response

At this year's Salute to Ocean County, a night to honor individuals and organizations for their work to represent or preserve art and history in meaningful, impactful ways, an award will be given called the Ocean County Cultural Response Award, to recognize creative and resourceful responses to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The three organizations selected for the award are Surfflight Theatre, Lighthouse International Film Festival and Brick Children's Theatre.



Outdoor production of Frozen Jr.

Photo credit: Brick Children's Community Theatre

The award has been given one other time, after Superstorm Sandy. In 2013 the Borough of Mantoloking was honored for its historic preservation efforts and the Vintage Automobile Museum of New Jersey for its recovery efforts.

Subject to changes due to the ongoing pandemic, the 2021 Salute will be a virtual program on Ocean County College Cable channel 20 or Verizon-Vios channel 24 scheduled to take place on Tuesday, June 15.

For Surfflight Theatre, "the show must go on" meant taking the whole operation outdoors. The organization built a stage in Beach Haven's Veterans Memorial Park and erected a 50-by-100-foot tent to accommodate 175-215 carefully spaced seats. The 2020 season, against the odds, kicked off with "Frozen Jr."



Improvised Drive-In Film Festival.

Photo credit: Ed Shi

The outdoor setup was a return to its roots. Surfflight's first show ever opened on June 27, 1950, when an overflow crowd reportedly more than filled the 2,000-seat "Surflight Amphitheatre," a tent in a vacant lot in the Beach Haven Crest neighborhood of Long Beach Township.

Last summer, additional precautions included hand sanitizer, temperature checks, masks requested, and barriers at the box office and UV sterilization. The theatre also eliminated intermissions to prevent guests from congregating in restroom and refreshment lines.

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Patron safety wasn't the only concern. The cast and crew mostly live communally in Surfflight's cast house. They were routinely tested and had agreed to socialize exclusively with each other, avoiding mixing with the general population at bars and parties. The theatre made it through the entire season without one positive COVID case.

In August, Tropical Storm Isaias destroyed the tent. Winds ripped the tent from its spikes and left it a crumpled mess. The cast and crew had scrambled to remove sound and lighting equipment as the tropical storm roared. Just two days later, Surfflight was back in business, presenting its delayed opening of "Mamma Mia." The effort was helped by the tent's provider, Ocean Tents in Manahawkin.



From This:



To This, in Two Days:

*Surflight tent blown down and rebuilt.
Photo credit: Mary Beth Smart*

The Lighthouse International Film Festival also went retro, by switching to an all-outdoor drive-in movie format.

The festival press release touted: "For the first time ever, an international film festival is about to go COVID-safe and drive-in cool. Soon, you'll be watching the 12th annual Lighthouse International Film Festival on the big screen, under the stars, from your cars!" Under the circumstances, the usual Hollywood-styled parties, filmmaker panels and networking events couldn't happen. But the festival did offer many great new independent films from around the world to inspire, educate and entertain.

The festival had the support of the Borough of Beach Haven and Mayor Nancy Davis, Long Beach Township and Mayor Joseph Mancini, Assemblywoman DiAnne Gove, the Long Beach Island Foundation of the Arts and Sciences, and the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce. The borough of Ship Bottom refused to participate, citing concerns about traffic, the control of social distancing in the lines for the toilets, noise, the lateness of the hour when the screenings would break up, and too many cars idling their engines to use air conditioning.

Nonetheless, the festival went on to be a smashing success. Audio was transmitted through car radios. Tickets were sold through an online advance purchase system only, by the vehicle, so there was no line of cars waiting to pay at the gate. Movie audiences were required to agree to a "COVID-19 code of conduct." Attendees stayed in their distanced vehicles for the duration of the screenings and wore masks on restroom trips. No concessions or merch were sold at the venues. Audience size was limited to 100 vehicles per venue.

“We are very proud that we have been able to keep operating during this time,” Brick Children’s Community Theatre Board President Kendra Zarrilli said. “We have an amazing team of professionals and parent volunteers who helped to make this happen.

“The feedback we received from our community was astonishing,” she continued. “BCCT truly made a difference within our community by allowing a small opportunity in a safe environment for our cast to perform and our community to engage in the arts and make family memories.”

March and April were on course to be busy for BCCT with its 9th annual children’s gift auction scheduled and its spring show, “Moana Jr.,” set to run at the Strand Theater in Lakewood. Both got indefinitely postponed thanks to COVID-19, and STAGES classes and workshops were cancelled immediately.

So the board and creative team explored alternatives to regular programming that complied with CDC guidelines and state mandates.

“BCCT resumed weekly theater and vocal classes via Zoom and FaceTime to keep the children actively engaged with the arts, while all monthly fees for classes were waived to help our families,” she explained. “Allowing the children to retain some normalcy in their lives proved invaluable. In lieu of our end-of-year recital, each child recorded their performance at home, so they could share their progress and their talents with the community.”

Once outdoor gatherings of 500 were permitted, Windward Beach Park in Brick was the ideal outdoor venue to present “Moana Jr.” The show was reworked and restaged for an outdoor, socially distanced performance, Zarrilli explained. The cast rehearsed via Zoom and, when outdoor rehearsals were possible, in the studio parking lot with precautions taken.

The children handled all of their own props and costumes and brought their own chairs to sit “backstage” in clearly marked spots spaced six feet apart. Every child had their own microphone, and parents were responsible for microphoning their own child. BCCT volunteers acted as distance ambassadors, showing patrons to their reserved sites and encouraging social distancing.

BCCT pulled off three sold-out shows of “Moana Jr.” at the end of July, followed by three of “Frozen Jr.” in September.

“While emotionally rewarding,” Zarrilli said, “the financial gains of these programs cannot compare to a full-scale musical in the theater with 4,000 people in attendance, full performing arts classes, and traditional fundraising initiatives.”

For 2021, BCCT has two outdoor performances planned at Windward Beach Park: “Matilda Jr.” in May and another, yet to be determined, in August.

According to Zarrilli, BCCT is offering eight-week classes, limited to just eight children in the studio at a time, and private voice lessons, with time for air purification in between. Kids are temp-checked and screened at the start of each class, masks are worn at all times, and the children are assigned a designated “box” in the studio that is eight feet from another child in any children are assigned a designated “box” in the studio that is eight feet from another child in any direction.