

# Strand Theatre



Lakewood Exterior.  
Photo credit: Victoria Lassonde

## Turns 90

By: Victoria Lassonde

**T**he Strand Theater may be the last bastion of legendary Lakewood, according to Ray Coles, founding board member of the Lakewood Development Corp., the municipal body that purchased and took oversight of the iconic theater in March 1999.

While Coles confessed he had once been among the objectors who voted, as town councilman, to cut funding to the organization when the chips were down, he is now a devout supporter who volunteers his time to bartend in the lobby during productions, knowing the refreshment kiosk can mean the difference between profit and loss on any given show.

One recent Friday afternoon, Executive Director Camille Biamonte led a tour of the historic building. As she walked and talked about the importance of forming and nurturing strong partnerships with other nonprofit organizations and community groups as an essential factor in the theater's continued success, a flurry of activity and anticipation filled the air as young actors busily prepared for opening night of "*Peter Pan*."

The actors were from Kids for Kids, the theatrical arm of the Colts Neck-based Ashley Lauren Foundation for childhood cancer. Foundation founder Monica Vermeulen, along with her daughter and the foundation's namesake, Ashley Lauren Vermeulen, explained the foundation's mission is not to fund research but to work directly with the families of patients, to help with emotional or material hardships.

Ashley Lauren, a lifelong lover of dance and theater, created Kids for Kids, which has more than 100 child actors plus parents and board members. While the troupe has done plenty of shows in other venues such as high school auditoriums, July 26 was extra special for the youngsters, as it marked their first show in a professional theater.

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And, that’s an integral part of the vision Biamonte holds for the Strand’s “next 90 years” – providing, for so many people, the first exposure to the magical, often captivating, world of performing arts.

“It really is about bringing as many groups in here as possible,” she said. Even while multiple generations of patrons continue to love and enjoy the theater, new

first-timers are experiencing the joy all the time. Just in the month of June, she said, Strand’s School of the Arts courses brought 13,000 young dancers through the theater, some having never before stepped onto a “real” stage.

The organization has never stopped evolving, Biamonte said, all the while cultivating key relationships. She joined the organization as director about five years ago with a background in nonprofit management. Backstage, among the pulleys and technical equipment and props and costumes, her appreciation for the magic of theater and awe of the building’s impressive age bubbled over. “I’m an antique fanatic, so when I’m back here, I touch these walls. They’re from 1922! How cool is that?”



Ornate Chandelier.  
Photo credit: Victoria Lassonde



Refurbished Splendor.  
Photo credit: Victoria Lassonde

According to the theater’s documented history, beginning in the early 1900s, the Strand Theater was a commissioned work by architect Thomas Lamb, hired by Ferber Amusement Co. to create a visually appealing venue for Broadway producers to use as a tryout theater. Architecturally, The Strand boasts clean lines and has a reputation for its outstanding acoustics, pre-dating amplification.

When the theater opened in 1922, Lakewood was a popular destination for wealthy celebrities such as Grover Cleveland and John D. Rockefeller. In its

earliest days, the Strand was a venue for silent film, live vaudeville and pre-runs of Broadway shows. Appearing at the theater as virtual unknowns were Ray Bolger, Milton Berle and Ruby Keeler. It was then strictly a motion picture house, until competition ramped up from suburban cineplexes and television. Sadly, “after several attempts to attract an audience, including a short time as a ‘porn house’ in the 1970s, The Strand began a slow slide toward oblivion.”

Then a coalition banded together to rescue and preserve the architectural gem. In May 1982 it was listed on the National Register of Historical Places. Ten years later, it underwent a \$2.5-million restoration. Since then, renovations have been made possible with support from Ocean County, Lakewood, the New Jersey State

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Council on the Arts and the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. More recent upgrades include a new reception gallery, box office and façade.

The balcony urns were recently re-created, Biamonte added.

Because of its Historic Register designation, she said, all repairs, maintenance and upkeep must be carefully OK'd. For example, at the moment, the proscenium needs some work to fix up some chipping along the edges, which has required "a battery of emails" to get the ball rolling on that repair.

Today, the Strand's mission is to produce events and present shows that reflect the cultural, ethnic and intergenerational tastes of an ever-growing population, offering holiday and musical concerts, plays, dinner theater and activities and programs for all ages from kids and seniors citizens.

Theater manger David Cruse came onboard in January, after he ran a post-Sandy benefit show there in November, with his disaster relief organization Rebuild Recover out of Red Bank, "and we wouldn't let him go," Biamonte said. "Or, I waseled my way in," Cruse added.

Biamonte said the fit was a good one because "his mission and ours are very similar."

After building a successful event production career in New York City for years, coming home to New Jersey has given Cruse more time to dedicate to making a difference in the community and area he has always loved for its history and culture, he said. The way it all came together, is symbolic of how the Strand is at the heart of a large network of creative people doing good work to advance the mission of arts and heritage preservation in Ocean County.

Having an invested, passionate, involved and deeply connected board of directors helps a great deal too, he added.

Strolling through the hallowed chambers of the dressing rooms below – in the same space where countless stars have prepped for showtime, where framed photos of such immortals as George Carlin adorn the walls – it's not hard to understand why the Strand is so easy to love.

For Coles, the effect was immediate when he walked in the doors – he was smitten. "Something about it ... just pulls you in."

And yet, although it's easy to get misty-eyed over the romance and grandeur, as a member of the LDC, which administers programs designed to encourage the town's economic development by fostering and/or expanding businesses through loans, grants and other incentives, Coles doesn't lose sight of the bottom line, the dollars and cents that must be generated to "keep the lights on."

