



Photo by Brian Tietz

In the Zone

By: Kelly Merritt

How Mark Danni has turned TheatreZone into a spawning ground for world-premiere shows.

How does a percussionist from Buffalo, N.Y., become the creative force behind one of Naples' most successful theaters?

How does he turn his young theater into a spawning ground for world-premiere shows? How does he lure the likes of Hal Linden to star in one of his original productions?

You're not born to be a theatrical impresario, but if you're listing the qualities it takes, credit TheatreZone Artistic Director Mark Danni with 1) a powerful impulse to seek out opportunities, 2) a sharp eye for talent (once, literally spotting it in his backyard), 3) a willingness to take risks and 4) an ease in making the most out of personal connections.

His first splash as a creator of world-premiere dramas came about when he recognized the talent of a new neighbor, Leslie Lewis Sword, who was developing a one-woman show about surviving genocide. The result: *Miracle in Rwanda*, which has since made its way onstage on five continents—with every playbill crediting the original production.

His second world premiere show springs from his idea for a play about Broadway producer David Merrick. Signing actor Hal Linden for the title role of *The Beast of Broadway* is a nice casting touch. The Big Apple will just have to wait. Naples' audiences will get to see this one first in March.

For Danni, the creative process is a complicated journey that reaches far beyond great ideas and casting the right people. To hear his story, one might think he has the theatrical equivalent of the Midas touch. But behind the curtains and monologues, this theatrical impresario's tale is one of high energy and great instincts. As he orchestrates his theater company's next season, Danni shares some insight into his creative process and the way his work advances from concept to opening night.

Performing

Danni's career path wasn't straight into the director's chair. He began as a percussionist in Buffalo, playing for *The Phantom of the Opera*, with a dream of moving to the conductor's podium. "You keep your eye on the prize, but you have to wait for the right pieces to fall into place," he says.

So he moved to Cleveland to study conducting at Baldwin-Wallace College. He worked with the conductor of the Cleveland Ballet and on opera and musical theater productions. Playing show after show, Danni acquired an arsenal of knowledge about music and theatrical shows.

It was during college that Danni met actress and choreographer Karen Molnar, the woman who would become his wife and partner in the theater—and who would share his devotion to it. Molnar's talent and connections led Danni to Broadway music director Jack Lee, who just happened to be Danni's idol and a graduate of the same college. In Manhattan, widely recognized as a theater professional's native habitat, Danni and Molnar thrived and stayed in touch with Lee, who ultimately provided Danni with his Broadway debut as the substitute percussionist in *Grand Hotel*.

For the next 14 years, Danni toured with numerous shows, including *Les Miserables*, *Miss Saigon*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Chicago*. They say luck is when preparation meets opportunity. Danni spent years preparing himself to someday become a conductor. But the theater had other plans for him. And if ever he had an "aha" moment, it was the first time he realized that directing would become his life. While conducting rehearsals for a tour of *Les Miserables*, Danni met Karen Carpenter, who maintained the direction of the show on the road. He hung on her every word.

"I would get into these discussions with Karen and ask things like, 'Why would this character do this if this happened?' and 'Don't you think it would be more effective if that character entered from over there?' and so on," Danni says. His previous aspirations stretched to being a conductor and musical director, but Carpenter believed Danni also had an understanding of the characters. "It was Karen who told me that I should try directing and that she felt I had an eye for it," he says. "I realized that she was right: I could direct."

Seizing an Opportunity

Danni worked on his final tour of *Fame*, which happened to play in Naples at the Philharmonic Center for the Arts. He and his wife, who looked forward to starting a family upon returning to New York City, invested in a rental house in Naples and leased it to performers they knew who came to play at "the Phil." They moved to Naples in 2002, when the Community School of Naples expanded its athletics and arts programs, and Danni became the director of performing arts. He ran the school's theater program with the understanding that he could start a professional Equity theater company in residence.

Once Danni saw the intimate theater on campus, he knew it was a place where the audience could really be a part of the production. Part of his talent is his sense of what will work on the stage, his ability to cut through and find the essence of a story. He has used this tuned-in sensibility to produce shows of all sizes, from grand scale projects to one-person shows.

"There has to be a wealth of entertainment for all sorts of different tastes, but I also have to look at scripts and understand instinctively what will work in that space," Danni says. His wife suggested he ask school officials about starting an Equity regional theater company. The Actors' Equity Association ("AEA" or "Equity") is nearly a century-old labor union representing more than 48,000 actors and stage managers nationally. Equity productions carry a credibility that non-Equity productions lack. An actor must first become an eligible Equity candidate before he can even be considered for membership.



Earning a Reputation

After a little more than three years at the Community School of Naples, Danni incorporated TheatreZone, was granted an Equity classification and achieved nonprofit status in 2006. TheatreZone is in residence at the 250-seat G&L Theatre on the school's campus. It wasn't long before the former mom-and-pop theater received critical acclaim, thanks to a roster of accomplished actors and musicians, brought to Naples via their connections with the couple and the theater's Equity standing. TheatreZone's first show was *Mack and Mabel* starring Gary Sandy, formerly of the hit TV show *WKRP in Cincinnati*. Donna McKechnie, the original Tony Award-winning "Cassie" from *A Chorus Line*, and Andrea McArdle, Broadway's original *Annie*, came to Naples to star in *Stepping Out and Evita*.

TheatreZone was also beginning to earn its reputation for premieres. Danni's willingness to take risks led the company to premiere *Miracle in Rwanda*, the project that's now acclaimed around the world. Part of his creative process includes constantly looking for opportunities with potential shows and ideas and asking himself, "Will this work?"

"That's the first part of the creative process—you look for opportunities, and then you have hopes of grandeur," says Danni. "Opportunities in life cross your path every day, which you choose to take or not take. You have to be attuned, recognize the opportunity and jump on it. There's always risk, but if you don't take that risk, it won't pay off."

Danni recognized the idea for *Miracle in Rwanda* was important when he first heard about it. In a twist of fate, he and his wife met New York actress Sword when she moved into the house behind them. After Danni mentioned his Equity theater company, Sword auditioned for TheatreZone. Sword told Danni the story of Rwandan woman Immaculee Ilibagiza, who

survived the genocide by hiding in a small bathroom with seven others for nearly three months. Her entire family was slaughtered. Sword was developing the impassioned story into a one-woman play, and performed about five minutes of it for Danni.

"I was riveted and inquired about TheatreZone presenting the world premiere of the work. I asked Leslie if she could develop the project into a full-length play, and she agreed," Danni says. "When all of a sudden someone comes in and says, 'I have the rights to this story, and I want to develop it,' you jump on that opportunity."

TheatreZone invited Ilibagiza to attend the premiere performance and speak to the audience after the show. She'd had plenty of national exposure—a *New York Times* bestselling book about her story called *Left to Tell* and appearances on PBS and *60 Minutes*—and Ilibagiza graciously agreed to come to Naples as well.

"Live theater can change lives, and I know this because I work with high school kids. I have a huge draw in my program because students love it, and they can transform by doing it," Danni says. "I once taught a student who had no direction or drive to succeed. After convincing the student to try out for a play, I gave him a small part, and he went on to perform in every school production." Danni eventually cast the young man in the ensemble of a TheatreZone show. The boy's parents later told Danni that the theater had changed his life in every aspect, from his social life to his grades and attitude.

Making Connections

Danni long ago realized that he has a strong gut reaction to certain things, and he's learned to trust that feeling. When the idea came to him for TheatreZone's upcoming *The Beast of Broadway*, Danni recognized another incredible opportunity was at hand.

The Beast of Broadway was inspired by the book *The Abominable Showman* about Broadway producer David Merrick. *Publisher's Weekly* calls the story, written by *New York Daily News* chief theater critic Howard Kissel, a frank portrait of Broadway's most infamous producer. Danni came up with the idea for the show after meeting a Los Angeles producer who was looking for a project for Hal Linden. Linden starred in the title role of the hit show *Barney Miller*. Linden loved the idea, with just one caveat: He wouldn't sign on to do the play until he approved of the script. Danni had a star, character, theater but no script—a situation very different from the director's usual productions.

"When I'm picking pieces to produce, it's interesting—I sit with a short list and somehow it all falls into place. I'm always trying to find a mix of things that the audience would like, but also give them a variety," says Danni. "A director also needs to understand the character and match that with the person playing him, because actors don't have the luxury of lots of rehearsal time to warm up to co-stars."

For Danni, it's important for actors to feel very comfortable when they walk into rehearsal, and he takes responsibility for providing that kind of environment. "I'm very cautious that I have the right kind of people working for me because we're a family," he says. "You have to choose the right people and create this atmosphere, so you're part psychologist."

Once Danni knew the kind of show he wanted to do in *The Beast of Broadway*, he quickly called on friend Larry Goodsight, who had helped form TheatreZone before moving back to New York. Goodsight signed on to produce *The Beast of Broadway* and knew several writers. Faye Greenberg, one of the writers of the *High School Musical* movies, came on board with collaborator Robert L. Freedman. Goodsight and Danni flew to Los Angeles, and the gang discussed the concept of the show. Greenberg and Freedman began interviewing celebrities who had known and worked with David Merrick, as well as his colleagues and even one of his ex-wives.

In October, Danni, Georgia Engle from TV's *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, writers Greenberg and Freedman, Broadway musical director Jack Lee, Broadway star Lee Roy Reams, TheatreZone Managing Director Ellen Elleman and Danni's wife, choreographer and co-star Karen Molnar, converged in New York City. All have a connection to TheatreZone—Reams will star in TheatreZone's April production of *Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance*. Engle will star in its January production of *High Spirits* and Lee will music direct.

"We had dinner at Sardi's restaurant, a legendary theater stomping ground in Times Square, and then attended *A Tribute to David Merrick* at the Town Hall Theater," Danni says. Reams performed in the show and took the group backstage afterward. At press time the script was nearly complete, and the excitement was building. *The Beast of Broadway* began pre-production, including set design, lighting, sound, music, costume design and sizing. After all this work, the show will play for two weeks with just two weeks of rehearsal—another reason the theater uses professional actors for its productions.

TheatreZone's season begins Dec. 3 with *Man of La Mancha* (starring Jeff McCarthy, who played Javert in *Les Miserables* at St. Louis Muny and the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway). Next will be *High Spirits*, opening Jan. 7, based on the play *Blythe Spirit*, starring Georgia Engle with musical direction by Jack Lee, followed by *The Beast of Broadway*, opening March 4, and *Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance*, opening April 22. The season will end with Cy Coleman's *I Love My Wife*, opening June 10.

Be sure to stick around for the curtain calls.