

Artistic director and founder Mark Danni

Life in the pits? Never better



LUKE FRANKE/STAFF

Mark Danni, artistic director and founder of the professional theater company TheatreZone, stands at the G&L Theatre on the campus of The Community School of Naples. Before arriving in Naples almost 15 years ago, Danni had a successful career as an orchestral drummer in Broadway shows.

■ TheatreZone founder's early job as a Broadway orchestra drummer prepared him for his current career leading local productions

Much of Mark Danni's professional life was the pits.

Orchestra pits, that is. For Danni was a drummer on Broadway for such smash shows as "Chicago," "Les Miserables," "Grand Hotel" and "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat."

"My childhood goal was to dress up in cat makeup and become the drummer for Kiss," said Danni, 50, now the director for TheatreZone, a small non-profit North Naples theater that often has drawn big-name actors to star in its plays.

Danni saw Kiss perform in his hometown of Buffalo, New York, when he was 11 and older relatives let him tag along to one of the icon-



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ic rock band's hyperactive concerts.

"Flames were shooting up from the stage and they came out, wham, blam!" he said, imitating a wide-eyed feline stare. "It was mesmerizing. I didn't want it to end."

So Danni gave up the trumpet in his fourth-grade band and asked to switch to drums.

His father, a civil engineer, and mother, a homemaker, weren't particularly musical themselves, but they encouraged his interest and paid for lessons.

By the time he got to high school, Danni had become so good he was playing paying gigs in jazz clubs and sitting in with classical orchestras. When musicals rolled into town, he played in theaters.

"People my age were waiting tables and mowing lawns," he said. "I felt so lucky to be able to make money playing drums."

Behind the scenes, Danni was peppering the musical directors with questions.

"My passion moved into conducting," he said.

At first, Danni wanted

to be a classical conductor, and he studied the subject in college at Baldwin Wallace University in Berea, Ohio, under maestro Dwight Oltman, founding director of the Ohio Chamber Orchestra and music director and principal conductor of the Cleveland Ballet.

"He talked a lot about ballet and told me how important it was to know tempos — encouraging to me since I was a percussionist," Danni recalled. "He said if you don't, a ballerina could break her ankle."

Danni also met his future wife, Karen Molnar Danni, a singer and dancer, at the college, and together, like so many young theater

See DANNI, 2B

DANNI

from 1B

hopefuls, they made a plan to move to New York after graduation.

In New York, Danni fell into the orbit of Jack Lee, musical director and conductor of such Broadway hits as "Sweet Charity," "Grand Hotel," "My One and Only" and the revivals of "My Fair Lady" and "Peter Pan."

"He got me a job in the pits," Danni said. "I was 22, and thrilled."

At first, Danni worked only as a substitute player, necessitating taking a second job as a middle-school band teacher on Long Island.

But as Karen carved out her own career as a singer, dancer and choreographer, Danni began to get better jobs with touring musicals.

"The Phantom of the Opera" paid for our wedding," he said.

Danni still wanted to conduct, but it was hard for percussionists to move up to the podium, because most conductors start out as pianists.

Eventually, he was able to fulfill his dream of conducting in such venues as the national tours of "Barnum" and "Les Miserables," as well as a regional production of "A Little Night Music" in Washington, D.C.

While touring with "Les Miz," he caught the directing bug as well and was encouraged by the production's director.

"He told me I had a good eye and great instincts," Danni said.

Having wearied of touring after eight years on the road, Danni started picking whatever directing jobs he could, from high school venues to off-Broadway productions of "Aggravation" and "What Would Esther Williams Do In A Situation Like This?"

Meanwhile, the Dannis had purchased a vacation home in Naples Park during their touring days that they usually rented out.

It became their permanent home after 9/11 depressed New York theater ticket sales for months, tanking many entertainers' careers.

Fortuitously, after they'd moved to North Naples, an administrator at The Community School asked Danni if he'd be willing to start a theater program on campus.

By then a father of three, Danni happily accepted.

Using his New York theater world connections, Danni was able to snag professional Equity (union) actors of some repute to appear in his plays, which are staged at the 250-seat G&L Theatre at 13275 Livingston Road.

The theater opened March 16, 2006, with a production of the musical "Mack and Mabel," a story about the roller coaster romance between silent movie director Mack Sennett and the unknown artist's model he made a star, Mabel Normand.

It starred television actor Gary Sandy, best known for his role as program director Andy Travis on the sitcom "WKRP in Cincinnati."

Other familiar faces Danni has been able to snag for his productions include Broadway's original Annie, Andrea McArdle; Donna McKechnie, star of "A Chorus Line"; Georgia Engel, who played the soft-voiced, long-suffering wife of obnoxious anchorman Ted Baxter on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show"; and perhaps best known, Oscar-winning movie and television actress and singer Shirley Jones.

"Actors love to play in our theater because it only takes three weeks, and we have warm weather and the beach," he said.

Danni usually puts on four productions a year, choosing what he likes to call "the lost treasures of Broadway." This year, he staged "George M!," about showbiz icon George M. Cohan's career; "Amadeus," a fictionalized account of the tussles between composers Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Antonio Salieri; Dolly Parton's "9-to-5," a musical based on the 1980 movie; and "Legs Diamond Lives Again," a musical comedy about a real-life Prohibition-era gangster and bootlegger whom rivals can't seem to rub out.

While his relatively small theater limits the kinds of productions he can mount, Danni said its size makes for a cozier interaction between the audience and the actors.

That's why, although he plans to expand to a 400-seat theater someday, he doesn't want the venue to get any bigger.

"I don't want people to lose that intimate experience," he said.