

Naples is getting in the 'zone'

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Collier County enjoys many entertainment options, and for those who like live theater, these opportunities continue to expand. Everything from drama, comedy, musicals and even original productions are available at The Phil, Sugden Theater, the Norris Center, Opera Naples and TheatreZone.

TheatreZone is the only Equity Regional Theater Company in Naples, according to Mark Danni, founder, artistic director and driving force behind the company.

He says there is a difference between community theater and equity theater.

"We are fortunate to have a wonderful community theater in Naples, where the actors are doctors, gardeners and neighbors," he explains. "An equity theater employs only members of Actors Equity, which you have to be invited to join and, in turn, we must comply with all of their work rules and other requirements."

When asked about the advantages of equity theater, Danni cites being part of a regional network and attracting professional actors as the most important. He points to Broadway star Andrea McArdle as an example.

McArdle is best known for her work in the original "Annie" in 1977. The role made her the youngest performer (then age 14) to be nominated for a Tony Award for Best Lead Actress in a Musical. She will perform the title role in TheatreZone's production of "Evita" which runs through March 9 in the G & L Theater, on the campus of The Community School of Naples, on Livingston Road.

Danni's connection with The Community School of Naples is no accident.

"I had been working as musical director at a high school in New York," he explains. "I was still maintaining my professional contacts there when I was first interviewed by The Community School for the position of high school performing arts director. I was very impressed with the facilities and the people, but when offered the position, I didn't want to give up my professional associations and proximity to New York."

Having conducted "Les Miz" at the Barbara Mann during its national tour and "Fame" at The Phil, Danni was familiar with and liked the Naples area, so he went back to The Community School and asked to establish a regional theater group there.

The school responded favorably and Danni, his wife, and three young children moved to Naples in 2005.

The theater's first season opened with Jerry Herman's musical "Mark & Mabel" in 2006. He says the most popular production to date is this year's "Leader of the Pack," although his personal favorite is last season's Chess.

"We seem to get a more positive response with each year and every show," Danni says, adding the goal of TheatreZone is to bring back lost treasures of Broadway as well as exploring new works.

"Danni majored in conducting at Baldwin-Wallace's Music in Education program, which led him to an early career as a drummer on Broadway. Later, his work as a conductor included national tours of The Phantom of the Opera and 42nd Street.

His wife, professional choreographer Karen Molnar, also is involved in TheatreZone productions. Besides Danni, the only other fulltime staff is Managing Director Ellen Elleman, who handles the business side of the house. A host of volunteers assist with the front of the house, ushering and manning the box office.

Ticket sales cover only a portion of the average production cost of \$25,000 per show and TheatreZone has various levels of sponsorship available.

The G & L Theater has a seating capacity of 250 and tickets are priced at \$40 for the center orchestra and \$35 for the side orchestra and balcony.

According to Danni, ticket sales have been brisk for Evita, which will be this season's fourth of five productions. Last Fall, TheatreZone opened its season with the Tony Award winning musical "Nine," based on Fellini's film classic "8 1/2." That was followed by Leader of the Pack, the Ellie Greenwich hit Broadway Musical, and a reprise of last year's world premier production of "Miracle in Rwanda." "Hair," the rock musical that caused so much controversy on Broadway in the late 1960s, will close the season in June.

"Our goal for next year is to return to four productions," Danni says. "We are looking at "Sweeney Todd," "Brooklyn," and Barry Manilow's "Copacabana," as well as two productions that were popular in London--"Blood Brothers" and "Whistle Down the Wind" by Andrew Lloyd Webber."

As to long-term goals, Danni has high hopes.

"Our objective is that TheatreZone will one day be recognized as one the major regional equity theater companies in the nation," he says.