

TheatreZone brings big talents to Naples

By: Carla Meekins

06/05/2007

You don't have to travel to New York to catch a Broadway-caliber production, thanks to TheatreZone, a regional theater company housed on the campus of the Community School of Naples.

TheatreZone is currently Naples' only equity professional theatre. By establishing a non-profit theatre, operating under the guidelines of the Actors' Equity Association, Artistic Director Mark Danni is able to attract celebrities to participate in professional productions of plays and musicals.

Danni started his career as a Broadway musician, quickly moving into conducting and rounding out his creative talents with directing. "My mission is to bring the lost treasures of Broadway to the Southwest Florida area. TheatreZone is also a launching ground for world premiere productions. That's what regional theater is all about," explained Danni.



Entertainer Jim Badger, left, and TheatreZone Artistic Director Mark Danni.

Case in point: the first full performance of *Miracle in Rwanda* debuted at TheatreZone. Now being considered for Off-Broadway exposure, it's traveling the globe, with performances at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland, at Stanford University and at venues in Los Angeles and Baltimore. "Southwest Floridians should be proud that wherever this show goes, the words 'first presented at TheatreZone, Naples, Fla.' will always appear in print," Danni added.

Miracle in Rwanda is a one-woman show written by Neapolitan actress Leslie Lewis Sword, based on the New York Times best-seller by Immaculée Ilibagiza, entitled *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*, her tale of surviving Rwandan genocide. Ilibagiza attended the world premiere, performed for Community School students this February.

Danni said, "Because of the play's subject matter, it tied in educationally, and the children were able to meet with Immaculée, and ask her questions firsthand." The play will return in February 2008, as part of TheatreZone's upcoming season.

The humanitarian aspect of the play has drawn more attention and support from the corporate world in the form of donations to the theater. Primarily, ticket sales support the cost of productions.

Danni isn't afraid to tackle the high-quality, innovative and contemporary "treasures" from Broadway. He believes there's a demographic in the Naples audience that embraces his choice of musicals and plays. Already on tap as part of next season's five-play lineup is *Hair*, minus the nudity. Past productions include the Broadway musical, *Chess*, by Tim Rice, which featured one of theatre's best rock scores, with ABBA's hit, *One Night in Bangkok*.

Veteran theatergoer Ken Schwinn praised Danni's direction. "As you know, this is a show that dies without very strong voices. How you found this wonderful cast is beyond me! Seeing the show was almost a religious experience."

Last season's performance of the musical *Baby*, chronicling the agonizing and rewarding experiences of parenthood, played to packed audiences. Danni personally plans each season's lineup, scouring the country for talent within the entertainment industry. Well-known personalities who have been involved in recent TheatreZone productions include Barry Williams, of television's *The Brady Bunch*, Jerry Herman, composer of *Mame* and *Hello Dolly!*, Gary Sandy of *WKRP in Cincinnati*, and Nancy Dussault from *The Sound of Music*.

"Actors are asked to join Equity. They have worked at their craft long enough to be rewarded with the appropriate pay, hours, work conditions, billing, health and pension benefits. Professionalism is what we strive for on all levels of any industry, and these actors are professionals," Danni said.

The superlative talent driving each production elevates the quality of TheatreZone performances. Coming in June is Back to Bacharach and David, starring Jim Badger. The musical revue celebrates the extensive songwriting hits of Burt Bacharach and Hal David, such as Alfie, What the World Needs Now Is Love, Walk On By and I'll Never Fall In Love Again.

Badger, along with Leslie Lewis Sword, Meg Pryor and Katlyn Campbell, will enthrall audiences with renditions of the popular songs of the 1960s, accompanied by a six-piece professional orchestra. Back to Bacharach and David opens June 21 for three nights and a matinee.

The G&L Theatre is located at 13275 Livingston Rd. Tickets are \$35. Student and group rates are available. Call 451-0215 for tickets.

©Naples Sun Times 2007