

PLAYERS

By the Sea

By Peggy McGuinness

Players by the Sea (PBTS), now in its 52nd season, is a non-profit community theater in Jacksonville Beach that "enriches the community through excellence in theater" while providing a variety of opportunities for residents to "hone their craft or learn new skills," says Creative Marketing Manager Bradley Akers. PBTS mounts a minimum of seven stage productions per season plus one or two "New Voices" productions, part of a program to introduce new works in collaboration with local playwrights. They are also known in the local theater community for the annual "Pelican Awards," their version of Broadway's Tony Award.

PBTS came into being in 1966 when three area couples decided to make their passion for theater a reality at the beach. One of the original six, Atlantic Beach resident Deborah Lucas, is still active with PBTS and is a Lifetime Member. The group was nomadic for several years until the early 70's when they established a Board of Directors and purchased an old movie theater at 1st St N and 2nd Ave N, according to Director Emeritus and long-time member Gayle Featheringill. When the theater burned down a few years later, the group was on the move again and eventually found their permanent home at the former Beach Laundry at 106 6th St. N. Since then, many changes have been made to the building both inside and out.

In 2001, to address the increasing hands-on responsibilities of running the theater, the board hired Atlantic Beach resident Joseph Schwarz as the first PBTS Executive Director (ED). Under Schwarz's leadership and with the help of a small staff and countless volunteers, PBTS evolved into what it is today. When the position of ED opened up last spring, a search began for a replacement and the theater is now interviewing several qualified applicants. Choosing a new ED has been a decision-making process that is "worth the time it is taking," says board member Claire Cimino.

The PBTS season offers a mix of theatrical genres and typically begins and ends with a "big production," according to Cimino, who is also Repertory Committee Chair. She and Akers agree that show choices are made not only for theater-goers but also to attract area talent and create learning opportunities for volunteers.

The Performing Arts Studio (TPAS), which is the educational arm of PBTS, provides "well-rounded theater education for both children and adults in an extra-curricular timeslot," Akers says. He envisions greater synergy between TPAS and the theater going forward, as well as a stronger connection between TPAS and the community. Education Director Jocelyn Geronimo has taught and mentored many young actors who have also appeared in PBTS season productions. Through their theater experience, Akers says, the younger students and volunteers also benefit from learning "valuable life lessons" like collaboration and responsibility, along with skills in communications, presentations and time management.

Akers has mostly volunteered as a stage manager and director over the years and feels that PBTS elevates community theater beyond the "amateur stigma" by doing shows that "challenge the community" regarding subject matter, emotional investment and production values. And for the volunteers, putting on any show is no small task, with what happens onstage being just a part of it. Show selection and rights, auditions, casting, music, choreography, lights, sound, set building, marketing, rehearsals, costumes, ticket sales, backstage crew, and "front of house" activities like box office and refreshments must all be carefully thought out and executed.

Cimino first volunteered 22 years ago and has been an actor, prop mistress and set dresser, among other things. She says, "being at Players feels like coming home; everyone is welcome." She and most fellow volunteers have "real" jobs that pay the bills, but theater is the passion that keeps them coming back to PBTS to do whatever is needed. After all, as they say in show business "the show must go on!"

For more information about shows and volunteering at PBTS, go to www.playersbythesea.org.



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