

Arts & Ideas

C1 STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE SILIVE.COM SUNDAY, MARCH 25, 2018



The Wagner College Theatre Department is celebrating its 50th year with performances all season. Nearly 1,200 people have graduated from the program with a theater degree and the department has staged more than 200 productions over the years.

WAGNER COLLEGE THEATRE TURNS 50

A nostalgic look back, and a bright future

Michael J. Fressola fressola@siadvance.com

The Wagner College Theatre (WCT) Department, an incubator for nearly three generations of stage professionals, turns 50 this year and the celebration will last practically a whole season. • An alumni cabaret launched the festivities in January and there's a gala (with performances, naturally), followed by "Wagnificent," a revue, and an alumni reunion in the fall. • Celebratory overkill? Not at all according to longtime (43 years) professor and former departmental chair Gary Sullivan. • "Well, think about it," he said last week. "When you have all these people who want to sing and dance, they will seize any opportunity to sing and dance. It's what happens ..."

TEACHING SHOW BUSINESS

Founded in 1883 as a private liberal arts college, Wagner had no theater department until the late 1960s.

The impetus was an ambitious professor, Lowell "Doc" Matson (1922-2001), an Iowa University Theater PhD.

He convinced the authorities on the Grymes Hill campus to launch a bachelor's degree program in theater.

Odds are, his argument was proximity: With the show biz capital of the western hemisphere a 25-minute ferry ride away, why not train theater professionals?

The department was launched, and 50 years later nearly 1200 majors have been sent into the world, employed as actors/dancers/singers, designers, directors, producers, managers, costume wranglers, crew and press agents.

Or, they're in not-theatrical settings — advertising, law, chiropractic, edu-

cation, administration, medicine, real estate.

No matter their work, alumni report a gratifying level of satisfaction, according to department chair Felicia Ruff: "No one ever says they regret majoring in theater."

And, in the collective departmental mind, alumni, no matter their profession, will be theater majors always. "Regardless of how they earn an income," Ruff said, "they remain artists. And we are proud of them."

At the moment, in the outside world, WCT is represented, on stage and off, in all kinds of shows, tours and productions in progress. To mention a few recent examples: "Pretty Woman: The Musical" (opening soon), "Dear Evan Hansen," "Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory," "Once on This Island," "Carousel," "Book of Mormon," "An American in Paris" "Aladdin" and "Fun Home."

SEE WAGNER, C2

C2 SUNDAY, MARCH 25, 2018 STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE SILIVE.COM

WAGNER

FROM C1

A FEW STATISTICS

Some 187 productions (mostly musicals) have graced the campus's Main Stage, plus 27 dance concerts and 55 productions in Studio One, the department's "black box" venue.

Some shows are such a good fit for young performers, they're redone every few years with a new crop of majors. When "Hair" opens this spring, it will be Wagner's third.

Fifty years back, "Green Grow the Lilacs" ("Oklahoma!") without music) launched the department in 1968. "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "The Fantasticks" followed.

Early on, alumni began to get work. Two 1970s graduates (both Staten Islanders) did especially well. One, Betsy Joslyn, went into "The Fantasticks" off Broadway, and later "Sweeney Todd," and "Sunday in the Park with George."

Another, Randy Graff got cast in a "Pins and Needles" revival at the Roundabout. Then she went into "Grease," "A, My Name is Alice" and "Saravali!"

And then, she landed Fantine ("I Dreamed a Dream") in the original "Les Miserables." A few years later the former New Springville resident won a Tony (featured actress) for "City of Angels."

Many subsequent alumni established themselves in the business. Two notables: perennially busy director Matt Lenz (class of 1986) and actress/singer Kathy Brier (class of 1997) whose credits include "Bat Boy," "Hair-spray" and a short but unforgettable turn as the "Last of the Red Hot Mamas," Sophie Tucker, in the Martin Scorsese series "Boardwalk Empire."

Following Lowell Matson's retirement in 1987, musicals began out-numbering non-musicals in the Main Stage season. The emphasis, pervasive in theater schools, is controversial.

Eventually in 2000-01, the department brought fresh focus to non-musical material when it converted a small storage building on the campus into Studio One, a 75-seat black box venue.

These days, Michelle Pawk, a WCT professor, working actress, and a Tony Award winner for "Hollywood Arms," often uses Studio One to expose students to the genre of projects and works-in-progress that they are likely to encounter post-WCT.



From left, Heidi Johnson, Susan Nock, Janice Lowenstein and Alexis Walkendoff perform in a scene from the Wagner College Theatre production of the musical "Gypsy."

ACADEMICALLY SPEAKING

The theater, by its own account in scores of scripts and songs, screenplays and stories, is a heart-breaking business. Getting access is a matter of talent and opportunity, but luck plays a big role, insiders insist.

Skills and confidence can be cultivated. Luck? Impossible to impart, unfortunately.

Majors are schooled in the on-stage and off-stage factors: Auditioning and performing, singing and dancing, designing and directing. They specialize in specific concentrations as actors, dancers, technicians, aspiring academics or administrators.

Failure is educational. Gary Sullivan

observes: "Going out on a wire and falling on your face is part of the process."

Current junior Bailey Claffey doesn't recall her five-hour departmental audition — singing, dancing, acting — as an ordeal, but she was not equally confident on all fronts.

Vocally (she's a high soprano who can belt) she felt secure; dancewise, not so much.

That's changed in the past two and a half years, she says: "I've had all this dance training at Wagner. They really prep us. I'm much more secure."

The department is close-knit, and that's a source of strength, she believes: "There's

a very strong sense of community here." She has friends at bigger schools, where the atmosphere is "more competitive and less friendly."

Claffey, who was Bernarda last fall in "Nine" and cast as Ronnie (she sings "Aquarius") this spring in "Hair," has given some thought to life after graduation 18 months from now.

"Well, I'd really like to get an international tour or a cruise," she said. "It would be good, too, to have some adventures, see a little of the world."

And after that? She laughed. "Broadway, television, film."