

>> an unusual FORT MYERS >> CHRISTMAS

BY NANCY STETSON

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Nothing says Christmas like trees hanging from the ceiling.

At least in Steve Eagan's opinion.

No chestnuts roasting on an open fire, no stockings hung by the fire with care.

Instead, Eagan's hung silver aluminum trees from the ceiling in the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre's lobby and decorated them with fluorescent-colored bows. And from inside the trees, colored Christmas lights blink rapidly. Elsewhere in the lobby — standing right-side up — are clusters of lime green, raspberry, blue and pink skinny Christmas trees. They look like overgrown Magic Rocks from those instant crystal growing kits popular in the '50s and '60s. Eagan's even placed some among the plastic palm trees and ferns.

"I thought it was a great idea when Steve proposed the idea of doing something non-traditional," says Susan Johnson, the Broadway Palm's general manager. "He showed me trees out of a book, a sample of what they could be. They were tall and thin and in lime green, hot pink and purple. When I saw it, it was definitely over the top, but I loved it. Then a week before, I started to get very nervous about the whole idea.

"However, I do trust Steve Eagan implicitly; he's decorated our lobby for the last three years. But in the last three years we've received more positive comments about how striking our lobby was than in the [previous]



COURTESY PHOTO

Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre's lobby is decorated with Christmas trees hanging from the ceiling with fluorescent-colored bows.

14 years."

Broadway Palm gave them free reign, says Eagan, owner of In Bloom Flowers and Gifts. "They said, 'Whatever you want to do, you do it.' We really appreciate that. Susan said, 'They'll either love it, or I'll be looking for a new job!'"

Fortunately, attendees are loving the unusual decorations. Approximately 5,000

people go through the theater's lobby weekly, and there's a wide age range.

"I don't think anyone has not liked it," Johnson says. "A few older women have commented that they're not sure about hot pink Christmas trees or upside down trees, but then they say, 'But it is awfully cute.' That was my concern: we have a large senior clientele, and I didn't want to offend anybody."

But the word she constantly hears from theater-goers is "whimsical." And kids, she says, absolutely love the decorations. Businesses come and have their photo taken in the lobby, as well as families. Johnson overheard one teenage girl say she felt as if she were getting her picture taken in Whoville — the playful creation of Dr. Seuss.

Some, impressed with the lobby, have come to Eagan's business, In Bloom, requesting he decorate their homes in a non-traditional way next year.

Eagan appreciates the freedom the Broadway Palm gave him.

"When you give an artist free reign, it usually goes better than if you tell them where to place their brushstrokes," he explains. Everything he does is custom-designed specifically for each client. Or, as he puts it, you don't ask da Vinci to keep painting the "Mona Lisa" over and over again.

Eagan wanted the lobby to look Seussical, whimsical and non-traditional, he says. Part of the motivation for hanging Christmas trees upside down from the ceiling was the theater's large volume of attendees.

"I was trying to think of a way to put the trees in that they could withstand the traffic," he says.

To the right of the lobby, Eagan suspended a white wicker sleigh filled with presents. Skinny candy canes in orange, blue, lime green, lavender and raspberry hang from the ceiling. Johnson told him, "The only thing missing is the Grinch," and Eagan brought one in the next day. (He sits on the runner.)

Johnson says she normally doesn't think much about decorating at home, "but this year, I went over the top" and decorated a green Christmas tree using solely red decorations. She surprised even herself.

"It's the nicest tree I've ever had," she says. "I give credit to Steve for inspiring me. I've never done anything like that before."

Ken Johnson (no relation to Susan Johnson) decorated the Broadway Palm's front window and outside. Where Eagan used Day-Glo colored trees with silver ornaments, Johnson used a silver tree and hung brightly colored ornaments on it: purple, orange, lime green. The decorations are rubber chew toys for pets, baby toys, bath scrunchies and thinly sliced styrofoam pool Noodles. He also stood Noodles on end and staggered them in layers; they look like the pipes of a church organ.

Editor's note

The images on the front page of this week's Florida Weekly are two of six murals depicting historic downtown Fort Myers scenes in a snow storm. They were commissioned by the Fort Myers Redevelopment Agency in 2004 and painted by muralist Jose A. Johnson. In the past, the murals have adorned downtown buildings during the holiday season but this year they were relegated to storage. Other local murals can be viewed at www.joseajohnson.com



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

The Style Counsel in downtown Fort Myers has gone with a retro look this year.

He also incorporated the colorful Noodles outside, hanging them horizontally and vertically like banners in various combinations from the theater's overhang.

"We had a lot of fun," says Susan Johnson. "Our decorations are whimsical, crazy, and over the top, but you definitely stop and take a look at them."

A few other venues in town have also gone for non-traditional looks. The Style Counsel on Main Street in downtown Fort Myers has gone with a retro look this year.

Nine strands with lime green, silver, red and gold sequins hang in the right front window, while nine aluminum Christmas trees of varying sizes fill the left window. In addition to a large silver tree, there are trees in bright green, red, orange and salmon.

Three sisters own the salon — Lisa Brennan, Pamela Nollar and Brenda Neukirch — and Brennan and Nollar decorate the window.

"Pam and I try to do something different each year," Brennan says. "They're knock-offs of the old tinsel trees of the '50s and '60s. We had one in the front window of our home when we were growing up in Ohio. It was on a table in the living room, and a color wheel with red, green, yellow and blue panels turned it different colors. We had a real tree in the rec room."

Brennan purchased this year's decorations at after-Christmas sales, including a Macy's in Tampa that was selling its Christmas displays. She calls this year's window "a spontaneous display of stuff I had at home." Though ornaments hang above the trees — oblong-like silver icicles and fat, scarlet top-like shapes — they didn't put any ornaments on the trees. The look is clean and '50s retro and clients continually comment on it, saying it's their favorite display.

Down the street, at Main Street Antiques and Collectibles, the two windows on either side of the front door are packed with old Christmas decorations: plastic snowmen, a couple of Santas with sky-blue eyes, Santa in his sleigh.

Peek inside the door and, in that odd juxtaposition often found at antique stores, you'll see a kneeling shepherd with a crook, with a sheep reclining in front of him and a six-foot cardboard cutout of Marge Simpson standing next to him. The displays — with all the objects for sale — include small trees made of tinsel, drinking glasses with holly and Christmas bells printed on their sides, and kitschy Christmas tree decorations.

Walk around town or drive around the county, and traditional Christmas decorations can be found in abundance — as well as inflatable snowglobes, Santas and snowmen tethered to lawns.

But unusual, innovative decorations are out there — you just have to seek them out. ■

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