

# BUSINESS PROFILE

## Will Prather: theater is in his blood

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On a Monday morning at the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre on Colonial Boulevard in Fort Myers, the curtains were closed and the sound was silence. 452 chairs were unoccupied. Gas candles at each table dotted the empty, semi-dark room with points of light.

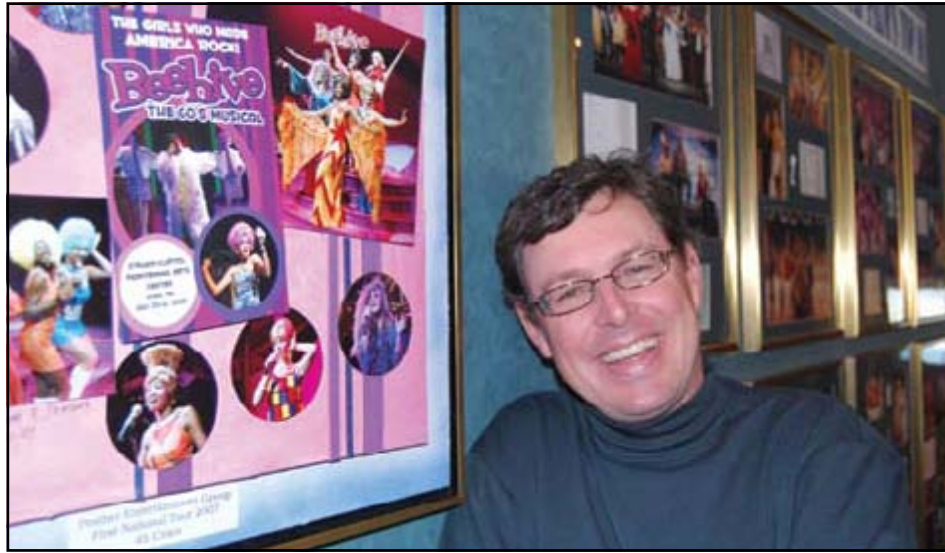
Owner Will Prather, 38, tall, youthful, black-haired and bespectacled, had seated himself at a table in back. His own theatrical voice easily filled the space, explaining how theatre-goers will experience the room when it is fully animated with the shared joys of colorfully sensuous productions or an actor's renditions of human emotion.

"My mother had a saying," Prather said. "She used to say, 'We're in the happy business.'"

Prather, who moved to Fort Myers in 1993 and opened The Broadway Palm that year, said theatre is in his blood. At age 10 he ran concessions at his family's theatre. At 12 he introduced shows, at 14 worked in the technical aspects of productions and later acted occasionally (which, he said, didn't suit him). Prather is the second generation in a family of theatre owners. His parents Tom and Deborah Prather (now retired on Sanibel Island) started the family's first theatre in Lancaster, Pa., Prather's hometown.

"The great thing about Lancaster is it's safe and family oriented," he said. "And you can be in New York in three and a half hours, in Philadelphia in one and a half, in Washington D.C. in two hours...My parents were adamant about taking us to New York...Lancaster is so accessible to all these communities."

But Lancaster itself was a conservative town, Prather said, a farming community, and when he arrived for hospitality school



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTOS EVAN WILLIAMS

Will Prather owns and operates dinner theaters in three states.

at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., "it was a bit of culture shock."

"Going to Cornell opened up a spectrum of cultural diversity that I wasn't familiar with," he said.

During and after college, summer jobs unveiled more of the world.

"I ran a marketing and ad campaign for Soho Soda in New York City," he said; that was the summer after his junior year. Later, he was a cook at a restaurant in Lancaster, then a food and beverage manager for a restaurant chain, before reentering the family business. He still owns and operates that Lancaster theatre, as well as another one in Mesa, Ariz., which opened in 2001.

In 2007, he kicked off a new National Touring Company, with a production "Beehive," the 60s musical, which traveled to 45 cities.

That was also the first time in three years the Palm turned a profit, he said, after three seasons when hurricanes had torn through town and crowds stayed home, or maybe just went to the movies. Each year the Palm's main stage is home to seven shows and a series of six concerts. In the same building, a children's theatre and the "Off-Broadway" Palm Theatre, each host three shows per year.

"I would love to take a show to Broadway someday," Prather said.

In light of his success, and the overall larger scope of his enterprise, Prather renamed the whole operation — the three theatres and the touring company became "Prather Entertainment Group."

"I think one of the reasons you see a business like mine successful during an economic downturn, is people are always going

to want to be entertained," he said. "Also, we offer a great value."

Dinner, a show, parking is all included for about \$50. Prather said he's constantly driven towards finding new audiences, and catering to their tastes.

"Some shows that I really want to produce, I can't do," he said.

But he does dabble in the risqué — "The Full Monty," for example, about six unemployed steel workers who form a male striptease act.

"I've seen over the past 15 years that I've been producing shows, that we can get a little edgier," he said. "We still have a very family oriented community, though...Now, that being said, we're bringing 'Cabaret' here in a few months. But we're still going to be very tasteful and professional."

The main stage also serves a wide range of community organizations, Prather said, giving them the room for free, and charging them nominal fees for food and drinks.

"That's a significant part of our business," he said.

Prather has been involved with many groups in Fort Myers, personally and through the theatre, donating time and money for organizations such as the Alliance for the Arts, United Way and the American Lung Association. He is also an active member of the Democratic Party.

"I kept my politics to myself for the first 10 years I was here," he said. Now he's a self-confessed "political junky," involved in Barack Obama's presidential campaign. "As much as I want Barack to be elected, whoever it is will have their hands full. Both domestically and internationally, it's going to be hard."

Prather himself has his hands full, with his theatres and with his son T.J., who he said is "the light of my life." He and his wife, Andrea, are making sure the 8 year-old experiences a range of culture — from Tampa Bay football games to Broadway shows — some of the cultural diversity that defined his own youth. ■

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