

SEASON

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"But overall, we were happy with the season, compared to where it could've been, when we read how bad the economy in general was. We tried very hard, knowing the economic condition, seeing it coming. We tried to make smart choices with affordable shows for the public, to give people an opportunity to come out as much as they possibly could and still put gas in their car."

Season highlights included "Cirque Dreams: Jungle Fantasy," which was so popular, the venue added a ninth show.

"It did very well," Saxon says. "People raved about it. We sold about every ticket to all nine performances. A fantastic week for us."

The show opens on Broadway June 16.

"People can say they got to see them here first," Saxon says.

"Spamalot" did very well for the Mann Hall, as did "Rent," which played for one night and "virtually sold out."

Other highlights of the season included concerts by the Moody Blues, Willie Nelson, George Jones, and Liza Minnelli.

"Liza is a legend; her show was well-attended," Saxon says. "It was a great show, people really enjoyed it. Any time you can have a legend on the stage, it's a coup."

Comedians such as Lewis Black, Kathy Griffin and Ron White did well too. Due to demand, the venue had to add a third show for Ron White, and even though it was Griffin's second performance at the hall within a year's time, patrons keep asking the venue to book her again.

Some of their best shows didn't sell out, though. For example, "Irving Berlin's White Christmas" was an artistic success, but not a financial one for the venue. People who attended raved about it: the staging was innovative, the singing and choreography superlative, and many of the actors had appeared on Broadway.

And, one of the highlights of the year wasn't a show, but an awards ceremony: the Lee County High School Musical Awards, which recognized outstanding performers in local high school musicals.

"It's something brand new to the market," Saxon says. "It was very well received and the participation was great from the schools."

As for the season overall, Saxon compares it to a stock portfolio.

"Some are up, some are down," he says. "As long as at the end of the year you have more up than down, you're OK. We certainly felt the effects, I can't say we didn't. But we're pretty optimistic that we weathered the storm, the worse of it."

The Broadway Palm Dinner The-



COURTESY PHOTO

"Anything Goes" was a big hit for the Broadway Palm Dinner Theater.

atre, on the other hand, enjoyed an outstanding season, which they consider the half-year of October through March.

"We had a phenomenal season," says Will Prather, the theater's owner and executive producer. "Revenues were up 20 percent and our attendance was at the highest levels ever in that time period in 15 years. We were very fortunate. We hit our stride with the shows we were offering."

The venue opened with "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change," which did well. The season continued with "Buddy," an annual Christmas show, "Guys and Dolls" and "Anything Goes," which Prather describes as "the capper for us."

"Anything Goes" was one of their top-10 selling shows out of all the shows in the theater's history.

"Cabaret" held its own in April, but then sales grew soft in May when the snowbirds left, Prather says.

"We are gravely concerned about the next six months," he adds. "With the local economy, it's not going to be easy this summer."

They've lost some groups that would generally travel to the theater via chartered buses - a staple of the dinner theater's clientele. Because of the rising price of gasoline, some of the bus companies now stipulate that they need to have full capacity in order to make the trip.

The venue did gain new patrons from Naples, because Prather purchased the Naples Dinner Theatre's mailing list when they closed, which had 80,000 names. Because of direct mailing to those patrons and print and radio advertising in Naples, the theater's seen an increase in Neapolitans.



COURTESY PHOTO

Clint Black wowed crowds at The Naples Philharmonic.

"I've seen that payoff exponentially," Prather says. "My guess is at least 50 percent increase in our Naples patrons. We're basically the only dinner theater in all of Southwest Florida. We're benefiting from changes in the competition."

Prather also owns a theater in Pennsylvania and one in Arizona, as well as a touring company, "which sometimes feed off of each other," he explains. "So we can produce our theater a little more cost-effectively."

But, he says, now that the snowbirds have returned north, "it's going to be an uphill battle this summer."

Theatre Conspiracy probably experienced the most extreme season of any of the venues; it left the Foulds Theatre at the Alliance for the Arts and was homeless for a while. The Broadway Palm Dinner Theater generously offered them the use of their Off-Broadway Palm theater space for a couple shows last summer.

"The biggest highlight was, we found a home," says Theatre Conspiracy producing artistic director Bill Taylor. "That was the main goal for us, to secure a home, get up, get running. We accomplished that, and I couldn't be happier."

The theater found a wonderfully raw space in an office complex on Park Windsor Drive, behind Sasse's restaurant. The space is intimate and fun.

"Relaxed is a good way to put it," Taylor says. "Someone called it Shabby Chic the other day. No one's been turned off by the space. Everyone who comes enjoys it."

"The audiences have followed us here. People have followed us."

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Including the shows they put on at the Broadway Palm, Theatre Conspiracy put on five shows this past season.

In addition to finding a home for his theater, Taylor considers "Maria" the other highlight of the year. A one-woman show written by Alma Bond and starring Joy Davidson, "Maria" examines the life of opera diva Maria Callas.

"I was approached to help work on the script, because it had been a book first," Taylor says. "And then as we talked, she said, 'Why don't you direct as well?' It just kind of snowballed from there."

In addition to a reading at Theatre Conspiracy, there was one in New York City as well. And Taylor has just received word that the show will be performed at the **Philharmonic Center for the Arts** next season in the smaller Daniels Pavilion.

The Phil itself had a good season, according to Phil CEO and chairman Myra Janco Daniels.

"Well, I think it was a challenging time, but I think we came out of it much better than we forecast," she says. "In 501(c)(3)'s, if you come out so that you don't lose, you do well. As for highlights this year, I think that frankly, the orchestra outdid itself. And it is our product, our home-grown product."

Other orchestras have not fared as well, in the state and around the country, she says, with some failing and others slashing budgets.

"But we have not done that," she says. "Our idea is expansion, expansion within reason. And we will continue to do that. I think our product is good...We made the most promising giant steps with our youth orchestra and the youth chorale... And this year, for the first time, we were able to give one child a \$15,000 scholarship, which meant she could attend Case Western in Cleveland, one of the better music schools."

Their Broadway season enjoyed great success, especially "The Drowsy Chaperone." Daniels recalls seeing it on Broadway and after the first 20 minutes said, "Let's get this."

And her instincts were right on-target. The musical sold out at the Phil, and tickets were a hot commodity. Daniels calls the musical "new, fresh, exciting and fast-paced."

Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and the Miami City Ballet were both highly successful, as were country singer Wynonna and crooner Johnny Mathis. And this past season, 12 different cabaret acts performed in the Daniels Pavilion.

In the Voices of Distinction Phil Speaker Series, Daniels points to Sidney Poitier's lecture as a highlight.

"Sidney was a happening,"



"Stones in His Pocket" was a hit for Florida Rep.