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Facing Page: 2010 production of "Rent"
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The Lake Worth Playhouse: *Always ready for an encore*

by Lauren Delgado

Actors often reinvent themselves to fit their characters, but few theatres can say that they do the same.

After many tumultuous years, the Lake Worth Playhouse has become a staple of the community, not because of its ability to remain the same, but rather its capacity for reinvention.

"The fact that we've survived so many different ups and downs is a credit to the staying power of this place," said Lisa Bankert, director of public relations and marketing.

Built in 1924, the playhouse was first christened The Oakley Theatre after its owners, brothers Lucien and Clarence Oakley. In true Florida style, a hurricane tore through the original building about four years after its construction. The brothers then rebuilt the theatre only to have it closed by an unnatural disaster: The Great Depression.

The theatre changed hands over many years, but not one of its possessors managed to keep it open. The Oakley Theatre

closed until 1975, when the Lake Worth Playhouse bought and renovated it.

"When I used to live in Los Angeles, people would say, 'If you move into a house with lots of cracks in it, that's a good thing because it survived a lot of earthquakes and it's still here,'" Bankert explained. "I think of the same thing with the playhouse. We've survived a lot of cracks and we're still strong."

Today's culture presents a new problem for the playhouse to overcome. Television, video games and the Internet make up only a few of the many distractions that keep the community from attending theatre productions.

"Our competition is the movies and video games and cable TV," Bankert explained. "It definitely takes more of an effort to get people out of the comfort of their own homes and to part with their dollars these days."

As a response to this, the Lake Worth Playhouse now offers a

variety of new and unorthodox entertainment and classes.

"It's a small community," Bankert said. "We really keep our ear to the ground to what the community is looking for."

Independent and international films are shown at the Stonzek Theatre, a separate black box auditorium attached to the playhouse. These films run every day, holidays included, which gives patrons a regular alternative to both plays and mainstream movies.

New fitness classes – such as Pilates, yoga and ballet fitness – have joined the playhouse's extensive roster of courses. Al-



though not traditional theatre offerings, Bankert said these additions keep with the theatre's mission to provide "entertainment, education and opportunities for artistic expression."

"It's very much a holistic approach to the arts," she said. "Our tagline is, 'Something for everyone.'"

Even with the new changes, Bankert said that their theatrical productions remain the biggest draw for the community. To reach all drama lovers, the playhouse shows about three musicals and two straight plays each season.

This season, theatergoers were presented with the opportunity to directly select the playhouse's productions. A list of about two dozen shows was put forward, with Playhouse patrons narrowing it down to this season's selection: "Guys and Dolls" (October 7 – 24), "Steel Magnolias" (November 18 – December 5), "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" (January 20 – February 6),



"Biloxi Blues" (March 3 – 20) and "Annie" (April 14 – May 1). As a community theatre, the playhouse allows anyone to audition for its plays. According to Bankert, this empowers people to make the playhouse their own, and keeps fresh talent on-stage.

"It's not only a good time to see good theatre this season, but to audition," she said. "There's a diversity of offerings to play here."

Bankert is a testimony to this. Before officially becoming a staff member two years ago, she was a volunteer, working in every aspect of the theatre, from stage crew to directing.

"There's a kind of playhouse magnet here," Bankert said with a laugh. "Once you get started here, you keep getting pulled back."



Like many of the arts, the playhouse is feeling the negative economic climate as funding from grants and donations shrink. However, their subscription numbers have steadily increased for both this season and last season.

"I think if we continue to really tailor our seasons and tailor our offerings to what the people are looking for, we'll continue to draw them in," Bankert said.

Despite hurricanes, economic downturns or cultural changes, the Lake Worth Playhouse always comes back for an encore. **PBG**

For more information on upcoming productions at the Lake Worth Playhouse, visit www.lakeworthplayhouse.org, or call the box office at (561) 586-6410.