

## Curtain Rising On New Theater In Southampton

*Fully staged productions and concert musicals are on tap*

By Mary Cummings

Barely four months have passed since the Southampton Cultural Center's Executive Director Kirsten Lonnie and the Hamptons' best known man of the theater, Michael Disher, first got together and discovered that their minds had been moving along parallel tracks. Mr. Disher—whose years at the now defunct Southampton College established him as a kind of Pied Piper of theater with a genius for attracting young people to the stage and making their talent flower—had been wondering how he might reenter the world he knows best. Ms. Lonnie, meanwhile, had been wondering how she could provide acting classes at the Cultural Center and bring live performances to the spanking new spaces of the newly renovated building on Pond Lane. Since then, they have been spending a lot of time together at the center. And last week they got together there once again for a conversation about the serendipitous circumstances that enabled each to solve the other's dilemma with a plan that also involves the Hamptons' best known advocate and originator of musical theater performances, Lee Davis. So here's the plan: On February 8, the Cultural Center will inaugurate its first season of live theater with a performance of "The Fantasticks," the musical that opened in New York in 1960 and ran for an unprecedented 42 years with music by Harvey Schmidt and lyrics by Tom Jones. Mr. Disher will direct his locally recruited cast in performances at SCC's acoustically acclaimed Levitas Center for the Arts. But that's just the beginning. In the following months, Mr. Davis will bring staged concert versions of Cole Porter's "Fifty Million Frenchmen" and another show to the Levitas and Mr. Disher will go on to direct Sam Shepard's dark comedy "True West" and Neil LaBute's "The Shape of Things." "Acting classes and theater were at the back of my mind," said Ms. Lonnie, a woman with an unfussy stylishness whose four years at the helm of the SCC have seen its facilities rejuvenated and its programs re-energized. Raised in Europe on a steady diet of concerts, theater and opera ("I was 9 when I saw my first opera"), Ms. Lonnie clearly views life's cultural dimension not as an optional add-on or injected "enrichment," but as absolutely essential. Armed with an MBA, high energy, and what she calls a "step-by-step" approach, she has gone about fulfilling the center's potential as she sees it.

"The Cultural Center is about education, display and performance," she said. By the fall of 2007, she felt she had the first two well in hand with programs that include instruction in music, writing and other subjects, art classes, and a year-round schedule of exhibitions. Under the performance heading, Ms. Lonnie said she was pleased with the variety of concerts the Cultural Center presents and with the dance program offered there by the Hamptons Ballet Theater.

"What was missing," she said, "was acting classes, theater plays and musicals in live performance." Enter Michael Disher—who, in fact did appear at this point in the conversation—having just come from auditioning a young hopeful for a part in "The Fantasticks" whose talent had taken his breath away. "And she's only 14!" he said, rolling his eyes at such precocity.

It seems that while Ms. Lonnie had been trying to figure out how she would fill the last gap in her programming, Mr. Disher had been exploring his options online. Spurred by the memory of a large room he had once spied at the Cultural Center, he went to his computer, checked out the current offerings on Pond Lane, "and I noticed there was a void in theater programming," he said. "I wrote to Kirsten, whom I did not know, and I basically said, 'Are you aware there is a true lack of theater in this area?'"

Not, he hastened to add, "that there hasn't been theater in the past." Now, however, with Southampton College closed (and Stony Brook apparently showing no signs of immediate interest in putting its theater back to use), and with the John Drew Theater closed for renovations, two familiar venues are dark.

To be sure, theater is alive and well in Quogue and the North Fork and Bay Street Theatre is a boon to the area, but Mr. Disher speaks persuasively of his conviction that what the Hamptons community lacks—and will now have—is "theater available to them, for them and by them."

"When Michael approached me, everything just fell into place," said Ms. Lonnie. "He wanted to teach acting classes here and that was exactly what I was looking for."

Or, more accurately, it was half of what she was looking for. It didn't take long to figure out that they both had the same idea for the other half: productions that would offer opportunities for talented

actors from the area to perform.

At this point, Mr. Davis was brought in to lend his expertise in musical theater and, in no time at all, the five productions were agreed upon.

"It seemed only natural to involve one of the area's greatest resources," said Mr. Disher of Mr. Davis. Now, with Mr. Disher's first session of acting classes completed, a second session already filled, enthusiasm running high for an acting workshop targeting high school juniors and seniors to start early next year, and rehearsals for "The Fanstasticks" gearing up, it seems that just about everything is in place—everything but the funding.

For a leader less committed and sure of her ground, this might conceivably cause a few sleepless nights, but Ms. Lonnie appeared calm and confident as she explained her funding strategy. Grants have been solicited with the help of the village grant-writer. The Cultural Center, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, "is also part of the village," she noted. In addition, as she spoke, an appeal letter was about to go out asking for support ranging from \$30 "Friend" to \$2,500 "Benefactor" contributions.

"Theater at the SCC is a community project," states the letter, which describes the fund-raising campaign as "a 'call to arms' to the East End theater community, organizing the energies and talents of artists and enthusiasts to make this dream come true." The letter goes on to observe that while ticket sales (\$18 general admission), grants and corporate sponsorships will help, individual contributions will be critical for success. Yes, Ms. Lonnie acknowledged, she is, in a sense, gambling, having moved ahead without guarantees that the funding will be forthcoming. But, she insisted, she is not out there all alone with the plan.

She stressed that her board has embraced the idea, "and I'm taking on the gamble with Michael Disher, who brings all his experience." Moreover, she added, "we have been conservative with our numbers, it's bare bones from the beginning, taking small steps."

Mr. Davis, commenting later, echoed Ms. Lonnie's view that, with Michael Disher on board, there is every chance for success. Calling him "a genius," he expressed confidence that Mr. Disher will attract young people to the Cultural Center as he has elsewhere.

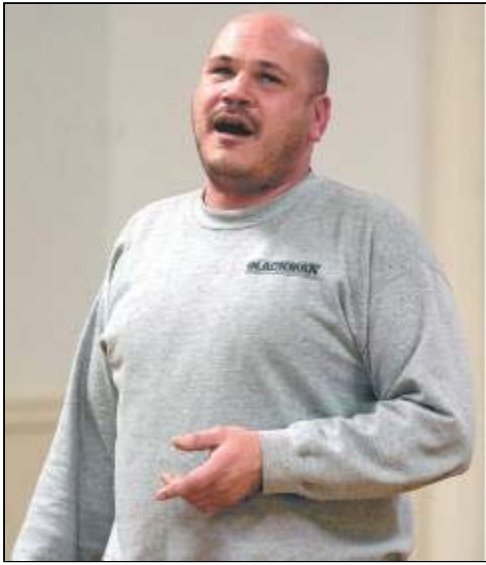
Speaking of his own involvement, Mr. Davis noted that everyone was keenly aware, as they made their selections, that "musicals are very attractive to people. When there are a lot of people in the cast, there are a lot of people in the audience," he said. "That is what is driving this" and, of course, he laughed, "we wanted something to do too."

Now there is plenty to do as Mr. Disher heads into intensive rehearsals and the fund-raising campaign goes into high gear. The excitement is palpable, success inevitable, as Mr. Disher sees things.

"Short of catastrophic budgeting, which is something we don't do," he said, "I don't see how we can fail. We are hoping this becomes a win-win for everyone."



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Michael Disher, director of the Southampton Cultural Center's production of "The Fantasticks," center, during the second round of auditions for the show last week. Pictured around Mr. Disher are several people who auditioned for the musical.

**DANA SHAW PHOTOS**



Kirsten Lonnie and Michael Disher. DANA SHAW