

From Dream to Gift: Tony Spiridakis' North Fork Arts Center at Greenport Theatre

BY DAVID TAYLOR

East Hampton Village has Guild Hall. Sag Harbor Village has Bay Street Theater. And soon, Greenport Village will have a multi-arts cultural center all its own, when the iconic Greenport Theatre reopens as the North Fork Arts Center.

While the use of the word “reopens” may imply that Greenport Theatre’s doors have been shuttered since it ceased operations during the pandemic, these days you’ll likely find the venue open to visitors with Tony Spiridakis, a Greenport resident and Hollywood filmmaker/writer, offering tours and sharing his vision for the theater’s evolution. A growing desire to transform the venue had been on his mind for decades, but there was a moment when his focus shifted momentarily and the dream seemed dead.

In 2012, Spiridakis co-founded the Manhattan Film Institute, a summer school program that challenged filmmakers and actors to create 25 original short films in two weeks, and he partnered with Greenport Theatre to have the inaugural event’s shorts screened at no admission cost to the community. Manhattan Film Institute’s trial run on the North Fork was such a hit that, contrary to its name, it never actually moved to Manhattan. As MFI’s North Fork Film Festival flourished at Greenport Theatre, its owner, then-AMC Networks President/CEO Josh Sapan, took notice. When Spiridakis pitched the MFI Winter Film Series in 2018, Sapan gave his full support — if Spiridakis could help winterize the seasonal venue for its first winter event in over 20 years.

“That was such a success because nobody knew how many of us there were living in silence and desiring something cultural to experience,” Spiridakis says of his fellow North Fork locals’ response to the first winter film series, which ran from December 2018 to April 2019. The subsequent series was unfortunately cut short by COVID-19, but Spiridakis didn’t lose hope that Greenport Theatre would reopen and that he’d continue working toward his dream of developing new programming for the theater and eventually expanding its scope to that of a full-fledged cultural arts center.

Then a different opportunity came knocking. Spiridakis was given the chance to produce a very special



THE NEW TEMPORARY SIGNAGE IS UP, SIGNALING THE MOMENTUM BUILDING BEHIND THE NFAC'S DOORS.

screenplay he’d written and film it in New Jersey with a star-studded cast including Robert De Niro, Bobby Cannavale, Rose Byrne, Rainn Wilson and Whoopi Goldberg. He took it and “disappeared” on Greenport for a while.

“I left the dream behind because I went off a year and a half ago to make a film with Tony Goldwyn directing. I produced it with him, and I wrote it. I completely immersed myself in that, and I’d lost touch with this (Greenport Theatre) dream,” Spiridakis says of his involvement in the upcoming feature film *Ezra* (originally titled “Inappropriate Behavior”). With the film’s focus on the relationship between a father and his son with autism, an experience Spiridakis and Sapan had bonded over, Spiridakis invited his Greenport friend to see a preview screening of the film. The reunion caused Sapan to rethink an opportunity he had recently seized in Spiridakis’ absence.

In January 2023, Sapan listed Greenport Theatre on the market with Dering Harbor Real Estate. The asking price was \$5.5 million.

“I got a call and (Sapan) said, ‘Listen, I don’t really want to sell this,’” Spiridakis recalls. “I think that (*Ezra* screening) just made him think again about maybe giving me, and the peo-

ple behind MFI, the chance to have him not sell the theater even though he’d just put it on the market.”

The two discussed Spiridakis’ grand vision for Greenport Theatre in detail, and Sapan agreed that he was ready to hand over the reins and allow his friend to steer the theater in an exciting new direction. The few strings that Sapan attached were to ensure that his monumental gift would be financially secured and lovingly maintained for years to come. If Spiridakis could create a nonprofit organization with a qualified board, raise \$1 million to facilitate operating costs and prove that the community supports this vision, Sapan would take the theater off the market and donate it to Spiridakis’ organization.

By May, the newly formed North Fork Arts Center Inc. had already received \$1 million in pledges, and once the process to become a 501(c)(3) nonprofit was complete, they began converting those pledges into donations. “The North Fork didn’t speak, they roared. They just kept coming, and they continue to,” Spiridakis says of the grassroots campaign, which has seen support from nearly 600 people donating anywhere between \$50 and hundreds of thousands.

Now, with the final draft of the theater donation contract in hand,

Spiridakis hopes to close the deal in the next four to eight weeks and have the new North Fork Arts Center at the Greenport Theatre open by December 26, 2023 to kick things off with a Holiday Film Series. “We will be gaining an asset, which is appraised well over \$4 million, that becomes ours without any liens or holds and no mortgage,” Spiridakis says of Sapan’s gift. “Then we also have a million dollars, which is a reserve fund. But as I have been doing my due diligence, I can tell you that I’m not done fundraising. It’s an old building and has been sitting dormant for over four years now ... We have to bring it back and make sure it’s weather-tight and safe.”

Originally built as The Metro in 1915 and practically rebuilt after the legendary Hurricane of 1938, the Greenport Theatre is overdue for some updates. The roof requires insulation, and the heating system must be replaced. The projectors, screens and sound systems have to be brought up to modern standards. And at some point, Spiridakis wants to install an elevator to make the upstairs theater more accessible. Maximizing accessibility, he says, will be an “ongoing process,” but first they need to get the theater operational again. “The main thing is that it starts serving the community with both education and en-

SALUTE TO GREENPORT

tertainment. That's the primary goal: to get up and running with the people experiencing it being warm enough to enjoy a movie or have a good class," he adds.

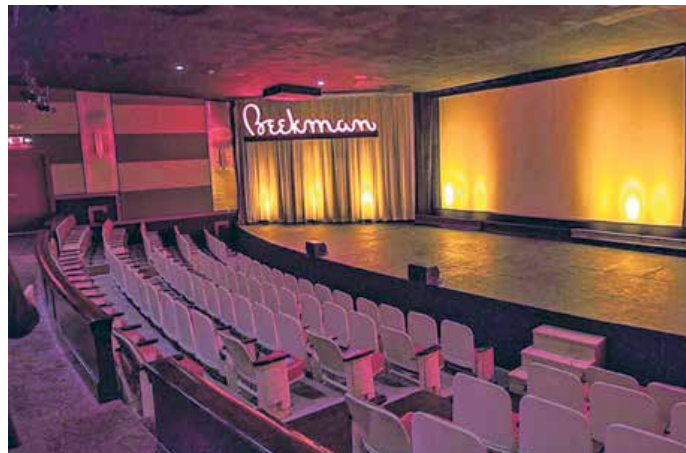
Spiridakis' vision for the North Fork Arts Center at the Greenport Theatre is to become the area's cultural hub for arts education and entertainment, like similar institutions on the South Fork. "I got really fortunate in having just the most professional and experienced board ... who all have a stake in making sure that the North Fork has a cultural center to it beyond the wonderful things that they have now, which include vineyards, hotels and restaurants. We love our restaurants, but we really do need the presence of a cultural center," he says. "Look what Guild Hall is doing — just terrific programming — and if you think about it, we don't have that much on the North Fork. We really don't. I mean, our Bay Street Theater is our North Fork Community Theatre in Mattituck, which is wonderful, but we're not given a lot of choices. There is no longer anywhere on the North Fork for a first-run film to be shown it. It does not exist."

The North Fork Arts Center will, in fact, be the only movie theater in the area to screen first-run films, however, these are planned to be offered exclusively from Memorial Day to Labor Day, with the four-day off-season schedule debuting with more specialized programming. Thursday nights are for Wine, Beer & Shorts, a laid-back program where a selection of short films will be playing on a loop, and visitors can pop in for a screening, then stay to discuss it in the café as they wish. Friday nights are for classic horror films, and Side-by-Side Saturdays will screen family-fun movies in Theater 2 and cultural-cornerstone cinema in Theater 3. Finally, Latino Cinema Sundays will feature culturally relevant matinees selected in partnership with the North Fork's Latin community. "We feel like it's really important to introduce the North Fork to world cinema and also to give a voice to a very underserved population in our community," he says of the Latino film series.

Coming alongside Executive Director Tony Spiridakis to flesh out the NFAC's broad scope of arts offerings is Creative Director Shannon Goldman, the founder of Super G Films and director of the MFI North Fork Film Festival. With months to go before the grand opening of the NFAC, the duo has arranged a diverse slate of tentative programming that includes a lecture series with world-renowned speakers, *A Bronx Tale* one-man show with Chazz Palminteri, a comedy night



TONY SPIRIDAKIS CONDUCTING A TOUR OF GREENPORT THEATRE



THE UPSTAIRS THEATER SCREEN AND STAGE AT GREENPORT THEATRE

with Colin Quinn, the Innocence Project with Betty Ann Waters and Tony Goldwyn, a screening of Sundance Film Festival short films, a Brooklyn Ballet residency and a Greenport expansion of the Hamptons Doc Fest.

It's strange to imagine a four-screen movie theater having the proper event spaces for all that, but the Greenport Theatre was never built as an ordinary theater. The 300-seat theater upstairs features a large stage that's perfect for live performances, and the 9,600-square-foot ground floor provides plenty of space for NFAC to get creative. Spiridakis shares that in years prior, he'd resorted to using the venue's hallways as editorial suites and art exhibition spaces, but he'll now have the freedom to establish dedicated art gallery and classroom spaces like he'd always envisioned. He also hopes to make the theaters available to rent as event spaces further down the line.

Educational programming will

take place year-round in the small downstairs theater, which will be redesigned as a multipurpose black-box classroom. The NFAC team has been in touch with the North Fork and Shelter Island schools to learn what topics would best serve their community, with programming likely to include classes on scene study, animation, photography, singing, acting and writing. Summer classes will be scheduled during the morning and early afternoon, before movie showtimes begin. The winter courses being taught in conjunction with the local high schools will be offered free of charge to encourage friendships between students who wouldn't otherwise interact. Of course, the MFI approach to education has always been intergenerational, allowing students from ages 14–80 to learn from and alongside each other, so NFAC classes are expected to provide a similar learning experience beginning as early as January 2024.

"We're hoping we can be ready to do that kind of work. That's a very ambitious plan, but the right plans are made to be ambitious," Spiridakis shares. "Nobody thought we could hit our goal and be ready to close on the building this soon, and we did that, so we're just going to keep dreaming."

It's a testament to the strength of the North Fork community and their desire for a cultural center that donations surpassed \$1 million in a matter of months, and Spiridakis says that each and every person who donates during this stage will be honored as a founding member. "Everything is appreciated, and everybody who is able to give now before we actually open our doors, becomes a founding member. That will be an acknowledgement somewhere in our lobby," he says. "We have to find room for 600 names, and we're going to figure out a way to do that, because it's just tremendous! ... (Josh Sapan and I) believed it would happen, but neither one of us could have believed that it would be this immediate and overwhelming."

The North Fork Arts Center is Spiridakis' way of giving back to the community that gave him his first theatrical experience, as an 11-year-old boy acting in a play at a Greenport performing arts theater that's long since been replaced by a hair salon. "I feel like I owe it to this community," he says. "I just want to say how incredibly grateful I am to the community for supporting this whole mission, and to the board, advisory board and volunteers without whom none of this could have gotten done."

To learn more about the North Fork Arts Center at the Greenport Theatre and to donate, visit northfork-artscenter.org.