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09.19.2023 FEATURED STORY

Across the Moat: Movies and more as North Fork Arts comes alive at Greenport Theater

By Susan Carey Dempsey



The Greenport movie theater, which dates to 1939. (Courtesy photo)

A multi-faceted arts program is springing to life on Greenport's Front Street, and not coincidentally, it marks the latest rebirth of the storied theater that has endured on that spot for decades.

It is now the home of the North Fork Arts Center, bringing together programs to encourage the artistic bent of children, senior citizens, new arrivals to the North Fork and those whose families have sustained life in these communities for generations.

Infused with the energy of a hands-on board of directors, the Center has been created as a nonprofit, giving a home to programs that started as concepts and are now about to flourish. The driving force for the group is Tony Spiridakis, who's had a successful career in filmmaking. His commitment to bring the Center into being persuaded the theater's owner, Josh Sapan, that the time was right to donate the theater that will be its home.

Mr. Sapan, a Shelter Island resident, has led AMC Networks for decades, recently stepping down to pursue other passions. One of them is captured in a book he published, "The Third Act," exploring how people — famous and not so — followed their careers by embarking on new occupations, avocations or volunteer work.

"Seeing the theater become the North Fork Arts Center led by someone with the spirit, soul and capability of Tony Spiridakis is a wonderful next act for it," Mr. Sapan said.

His donation of the theater is the linchpin that has allowed the group to anchor these programs in the North Fork Arts Center, giving it the critical mass to have an impact on the surrounding communities.



The iconic neon sign was installed as part of an extensive renovation effort. (Courtesy photo)

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Mr. Spiridakis plans to engage students from the four surrounding high schools, Shelter Island, Greenport, Southold and Mattituck in theater arts programs, enlisting the talents of board members to offer guidance in auditioning, voice, scene study and more. Each of the schools has its own drama program, and they compete against each other for the local Teeny Awards for their performances. This will be a new step, bringing the students together to take advantage of "a creative clubhouse," he said.

The Center has reached out to John Kaasik, who's directed school musicals for several years at the Shelter Island School, to begin to discuss their plans. "It's nice to see more theater coming to the East End," Mr. Kaasik said.

The Center will seek to be not only a resource that will span the different cultures throughout the community, but inter-generational as well. Mr. Spiridakis has shared his own expertise as a volunteer working with residents of Peconic Landing, helping senior citizens write their own life stories as if they would be captured on film.

He visited the theater recently with a group of board members to discuss the launch of the Arts Center with the Reporter. Board member Paul Henry spoke of the many people who have had successful careers, finding a way to give back to the community through the new arts program. He will share his own background in puppeteering as well as a course in animation, for youths age 16 and under in the summer months. "It's a win-win-win," he said.

Seeing these efforts come to fruition is "exhilarating," said Phyllis Ehrlich, another board member who's an author, editor, producer, and former senior executive at The Walt Disney Company, Turner Broadcasting and Time Warner.

Joel Ehrlich, a former actor and senior executive at Marvel Films, who co-chairs the advisory board, said they had received an enthusiastic response from people willing to share their expertise, from law, publishing, entertainment and other creative fields. "The North Fork community didn't just speak, it roared," Mr. Henry said.

There is a full roster of programming planned for the upstairs theater, which has 300 seats. Mr. Spiridakis plans to draw upon his network of show business contacts, like Colin Quinn to do standup comedy, and Chazz Palminteri to share his experiences in movie making. "We'll pull more in," he said, "to share their passions."

It will also offer a home to the Brooklyn Ballet, for a three-week spring residency where they can develop their choreography.

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While Greenport is bustling during the summer months, with the local population swelled by summer residents and tourists, the quieter months, what Mr. Spiridakis calls the "shoulder season," can use the boost the Arts Center will bring, scheduling programs during the fall, winter and spring.

Selected shorts will be shown on Thursdays; patrons can dip in and out of the theater's cafe for wine and beer, then return to catch a film running on a loop. Fridays will be Horror Nights; Saturdays can offer separate movies for adults and children in the smaller theaters that seat 160 and 130 patrons, respectively. Sundays will feature Latino Cinema, chosen in coordination with the local community.

"The local businesses are very happy," he said. Not only businesses, but individuals and families throughout the community have joined their support to the effort, contributing to a \$1 million fundraising campaign. "We plan to have a Founders Wall to honor all the people who have contributed," said Mr. Spiridakis. So far, there are 600 of them, in all size donations.

Eventually, coming full circle, the Greenport Theater is expected to show first-run films once more, by the summer of 2024. It may seem like an ambitious goal right now, but then, so did the North Fork Arts Center not so long ago.

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