

## ARTS

### EXIT 82 THEATER COMPANY, THE LITTLE THEATER COMPANY THAT COULD *'Hey, kids, let's put on a show' for a new century*

By [JD Watson](#) | [Email the author](#) | 9:27am  
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The 1937 Rodgers and Hart musical "Babes in Arms" and the 1939 Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland movie of the same name have inspired countless parodies of the earnest and well-meaning spirit in community theater to all pitch together and put on a show in order to save the day.

Like many clichés, there's more than a little truth to it; community theater is filled with many big-hearted souls who make up for any great lack of theatrical talent with a surplus of dedicated work mixed with considerable amounts of vanity and ego. Sometimes, though, just the right combination of fresh-faced energy mixes with polished professionalism to produce a memorable evening of theatrical entertainment.

So it was recently at the latest production of the Exit 82 Theatre Company.

A group of tables lined the back wall of Ocean County Library's Mancini Hall in Toms River last week; trays of homemade desserts, urns of coffee and hot water for tea were available for the taking. Easy chairs were arranged near the stage with a number of tables and groups of chairs strewn about the room in an effort to make the room a bit more like a cabaret. The Exit 82 Theatre Company was putting on a show in a space that, despite the soft lighting and warm color scheme, would hardly be considered intimate, but in the can-do spirit of "puttin' on a show," the cast members worked at making the space a little more intimate, a little more inviting.

"We asked everyone to make a dessert at home," said Keely Davenport, co-organizer, founder and performer to Exit 82. Attention to detail can, sometimes, work wonders.

The company, formed in 2008 by a group of friends and Toms River High School East graduates, gathered on Thursday night to present Legato: An Evening of Music at the library.



Christie Schwartzman sings "Right in Front of Your Eyes" from "The Wedding Singer" accompanied by Musical Director Carol Lombardi on the piano.

Co-founders, organizers of and performers in Thursday's show, Keely Davenport and Billy Cardone, explained how the program came together. "We had the idea to do something while we were home," Davenport said.

She, like many of the performers Thursday night, is a college student. "These are all people we've worked with and are comfortable with," she explained.

She and Cardone called actors they knew and explained that they wanted to put together an evening of musical numbers. Phone calls and emails were traded with song ideas. Songs were agreed upon. Cardone and Davenport put the songs in a sequence they thought would work. The cast had one full rehearsal, the night before the performance, according to Davenport.

"Legato" is a musical term that means to play the notes in a piece of music smoothly so they run together. Appropriately, the sixteen songs performed were presented in just such a manner, with little breaks between numbers.

While the audience applauded, the singers met the next performers at some prearranged spot around the room, passing the microphones before the next song began.

"I wanted to keep it moving, flowing," Cardone explained. "We definitely didn't want it to drag." Such dynamic staging helped the evening have an almost organic feel to the songs, allowing the audience to feel more a part of the show.

Cardone admitted to wanting to avoid static singers standing at a bare microphone on an empty stage. The show certainly succeeded on that point.

The evening's performers were uniformly solid; every singer clearly found songs each was comfortable singing. Notably, only Cardone's selection of George and Ira Gershwin's "I Can't Be Bothered Now" could have been taken from your grandparents' Broadway songbook. The rest of the material was from musicals written within the past 25 years.

The company deserves to be recognized for avoiding easy song choices. Excepting Annette Curran's sassy, crowd-pleasing presentation of Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind," the only song that might approach popular recognition would be Vincent DiStefano's earnest performance of "The Music of the Night" from "The Phantom of the Opera."

Some of the numbers benefited particularly well from the cabaret-like atmosphere. Jenna Bitow's lovely performance of "Stars and the Moon" from "Songs for a New World" and Jackie Nuzzo's well-delivered performance of "I Can Do Better than That" from "The Last Five Years" were two stand-outs. Both enjoyed the advantage of strong characters written by composer Jason Robert Brown as much as their respective strong performances.

Kerri McNeil's performance of "Astonishing," a song about self-realization and ambition, from the musical "Little Women" could have served as the evening's, if not the company's, theme song: the little theater company that could.

Arthur Waldman, theater professor at Ocean County College and director of the OCC Theater Company, attended Thursday night's performance and appreciated the show's direction. "One of my favorite things about the show was the set-up of the room," he said. "It certainly gave the feeling of being in a club. It really worked well. I've seen lots of things (at Mancini Hall) but this really worked."

The company has been busy during its first two years in existence. Its inaugural production, "On the Town" was mounted in the summer of 2009 in the auditorium at Intermediate East. Last year, the company produced "Thoroughly Modern Millie" at Toms River High School North. The company hopes to eventually find a permanent home, Davenport said. In the meantime, they are content to mount shows in whatever space they can find.

Davenport explained the desire to do a show at this busy time of year. With the company in full operation only during the summer—when all of the college students involved in the company are home from school—it's important to keep the brand name in front of the audience. That, coupled with the fact that "there's so much talent in this area, talent that we wanted to showcase," the show at the library become a natural outlet.

Waldman, who in his over forty years heading the theater department at OCC has seen more than his fair share of community theaters come and go, admired the group's professionalism. "They do things well. They've got the best marketing, their website—it's all first class, which is to be commended," he said.

Davenport and Cardone said that the company was deliberating a final choice for their upcoming production this summer. Their final decision is expected to be made and announced within the next few weeks.

COMMENTS (1)

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[11:29am on Sunday, January 9, 2011](#)

We were there. It was a unique presentation. The performers, song selections, presentation, quality of delivery and musicality were combined to deliver an enjoyable, fresh evening of art to the fortunate audience. Innovative thinking and great young talent gave us something special and promises more in Exit 82's summer of 2011 play. N & D