

Broadway on Delmarva

Wilmington's DuPont Theater brings famous shows to the peninsula

By HAL ALPIAR

When did you last experience that special curtain-going-up moment as part of a Broadway show audience? Months ago? Years ago? Never?

Well, who wants to drive three or four hours or more, pay \$100-200 each for tickets, and rack up lodging, eating and parking expenses just to see some show that seems like it might be good, but you have no way of knowing for sure?

Don't torture yourself, but don't miss seeing the best of Broadway either. You can accomplish both by driving to Wilmington, Del. and visiting DuPont Theatre, the chemical company's "gift to the community."

"This is the oldest, continuously operating legitimate theatre in the entire United States," says Diana Milburn, theater manager of audience development and group sales – and, according to her coworkers, an accomplished opera singer.

"Thanks to the DuPont Company's support for over 90 years, the theatre has survived the toughest of times," Milburn adds. In fact, she says, except on the governor's orders – during, for example, the flu epidemic of 1918 – the theatre's doors have never closed.

From a business funding and budgeting standpoint, the spectacular 1,252-seat theatre is clustered together with its parent structure, the Hotel DuPont, and the nearby DuPont Country Club. The three operations are treated as a separate Small

Business Unit (SBU) of the DuPont Company.

DuPont management charges this SBU with adhering to the same accountability standards as other product and service SBU divisions of the company. The result is an operating and funding structure that offers a degree of recession-proof budget support not typically available to most theatres.

With just six full-time staffers, the DuPont Theatre never rests, but it also never produces its own shows. The Theatre instead acts as an agent. Milburn, together with the expert scheduling and timing guidance provided by General Manager John Gardner, scouts, negotiates, books, and pays the Broadway troupes for their shows. The team also negotiates theatre rental arrangements with other between-show performances, including concerts headlined by celebrities like Tom Jones, Hall & Oates, and Bobby Rydell.

Since the theatre's doors opened in 1913, when 25-cent balcony seats were available, virtually every legendary show and performer has graced the DuPont stage, from Sarah Bernhardt

and Helen Hayes, to John and Ethel Barrymore, and Sir Laurence Olivier in "Murder on the Second Floor."

Autographed photos and memorabilia that line the glass-encased lobby displays testify to the performances of so many more magical names over the years. And behind the glamour and gushing excitement ignited by visits from Gregory Peck, Carol

Channing, Gloria Swanson, and Robert Redford are the whispered stories that help build the theatre's name and culture.

You're as likely to find display case representations of Joel Grey in "Cabaret," the world's most renowned pantomime performer Marcel Marceau, and Pulitzer winners Eugene O'Neill and George Gershwin, as

you would Broadway's current top award-winner Stacy Keach as Richard Nixon in "Frost/Nixon," which made its rounds at the theater in December 2008. Theatre staffers are already buzzing about glass case photo space for Tony Award-winning "Spamalot," when the show arrives the last week of March.

Parents of Delmarva children, from pre-school to eighth grade, will not

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want to miss the DuPont Theatre's schedule of outstanding Children's Theatre Series productions. And if Wilmington is too far to travel, a number of these performances are offered in Dover, Del.

With over 40,000 children in attendance last year, Children's Series Coordinator Barbara Slavin, a former pre-school owner and elementary teacher, says "there is great emphasis on supporting and supplementing existing school curricula."

"Each performance," says Slavin, a Wilmington native and part-time Ocean View, Del. resident, "is a natural extension of the educational experience and study guides we make available through various Internet links."

"Curriculum standards for individual shows," says Slavin, "are attained with some or all of the following con-

nections: family relationships; language/communication skills; multicultural," and more.

Milburn and Slavin both emphasize that, for Delmarva residents, DuPont Theatre productions are closer, easier to get to, and less expensive than those offered in New York, Baltimore, or Philadelphia, but with the same performers.

The Rehoboth Beach Art League and the Adult Plus Program at Delaware Technical & Community College have been loyal patron providers. Both arrange regular series subscription and transportation packages to and from the acclaimed theatre.

Adult Plus Program participants, according to program director Linda Forte, "receive member discounts, but the transportation/seating arrangement packages we host are available

to the general public, and to all ages. Many Delmarva parents take advantage of these trips by making them special family events," she says.

Information for the Del Tech & Community College Program is available from Linda Forte at 302.856.5618.

Patrons and theatre management alike acknowledge today's tight economy limits travel distances and entertainment budgets. But all agree that Broadway hits at the DuPont Theatre – plus children's performances both there and in Dover – offer families a great option for these lifetime memories. There is, they say, no reason to miss the world-class theatre experience, year-round, in Delmarva's own backyard. **DQ**

Hal Alpiar is an award-winning business writer based in Millsboro, Del. He blogs at www.halalpiar.com.

Catch a show!

The Dupont Theater offers great programming for kids - and teachers can utilize online study guides to make the trip fun and educational.

April 6, 2009: "Four Score and Seven Years Ago." The story of two men of different races and different sides of the Civil War, who befriend one another in an exciting and suspenseful musical. Grades 3-8; \$6.

Study guide:

www.artspower.org/shows/four-score-and-seven-years-ago/assets/FS-study-buddy.pdf

April 20, 2009: "Silent Boy." Dramatic adaptation from Lois Lowry's book based in Pennsylvania in the early 1900s about precocious and curious Katy Thatcher and autistic neighbor Jacob. At Delaware State University, Dover. Grades 4-8; \$6.

Study guide:

www.artspower.org/shows/silent-boy/index.htm

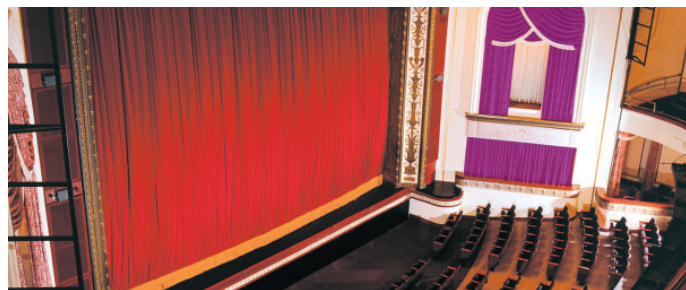
May 11, 2009: "The Jungle Book." Musical based on Rudyard Kipling classics, takes Mowgli on a life full of adventure and conflict. Filled with mystery and danger. K-5; \$6.

Study guide:

www.theatreiv.org/guide/jungle.pdf

May 14, 2009 and **May 15, 2009:** 10am and noon at

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Delaware State University, Dover; grades K-5; \$6: "Nate the Great." New musical about teamwork and friendship featuring pint-size detective Nate from the first of Marjorie Weinman Sharmat's classic book series.

Delaware State University, Dover; grades K-5; \$6.

Study guide:

http://theatreworksusa.org/uploads/studyguide_780pdf

May 16, 2009: "Junie B. Jones." Join Junie B. fans to see the "bestest" musical ever featuring First Grader (at Last!), Boss of Lunch, One-Man Band, and Top-Secret Personal Beeswax Journal. Make it a party group or bring a gang of friends and save \$1 per ticket! At the Schwartz Center, Dover. Grades K-5; \$12.

Study guide:

http://theatreworksusa.org/uploads/studyguide/studyguide_622pdf

On the Web:

Find more on shows, times and availability at:

www.duponttheater.com

Or contact Barbra Slavin at:

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