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Bean-Brown Theatre to celebrate 15 years with a 'Command Performance'

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Anticipation warps time. When what is now the Bean-Brown Theatre, home to Theatre Tuscaloosa, was still just an echoing cavern of cement, dust and construction workers, time dragged at a snail's pace.

It seemed opening day would never arrive. But, of course, it finally did, and the curtain went up on "My Fair Lady."

Then time warped again, only in the other direction.

Blink.

And 15 years passed. Not 15 years of Rip Van Winkle-ish slumber, but of "Drowsy Chaperone"s enjoying "A Little Night Music," in "A Secret Garden" where "The Sound Of Music" plays "Always ... Patsy Cline."

But patrons know and remember, and can make better jokes than that. In the program for 2013's summer musical "Bye Bye Birdie," a form was supplied, asking Theatre Tuscaloosa fans for their favorites — songs, scenes, shows and performers — from the preceding decade and a half in the Bean-Brown. From that list, and also with input from long-time performers, directors and other artists, Theatre Tuscaloosa has assembled its "Command Performance," a one-night-only show to be performed May 17 as a kind of greatest-hits concert.

Theatre Tuscaloosa is keeping the full contents of the show a surprise, so unexpected moments can hit the audience over the head and heart, but you might be able to guess some of what's been commanded by the cast list, which includes Stacy Alley, Sara Mason Avery, Drew Baker, Clifton Baker, Justin Barnett, Ava Buchanan, Cole Cabiness, Anna Kate Campbell, Kathryn David, Matthew Eubanks, Beth Stomps Feller, Brent Jones, Lindsey Jones, Wheeler Kincaid, Emily McGuire, Mary Kathryn Mathews, Doff Procter, Charles Prosser, Dave Rogers, Wesley Rorex, Jenny Ryan, Destiny Schatzline, Ray Taylor, Lisa Waldrop, Jake Whipple, Laura White, Willie Williams, Jeff Wilson, Kathy Wilson and Gary Wise.

Many of those are still performing here, but at least a few will travel from out of town, including former Miss Alabama Beth Stomps Feller, who performed shows such as "Secret Garden," "Man of La Mancha" and the "Some Enchanted Evening"



The Bean-Brown Theatre is celebrating 15 years of operation with a Gala. Photo Illustration Anthony Bratina

revue Theatre Tuscaloosa took to Schordorf, Germany. Others such as Charles Prosser, Ava Buchanan, Lisa Waldrop, Jeff Wilson and Gary Wise have had so many standout moments for the company that they could probably put on a greatest-hits revue just among themselves.

Ray Taylor, himself a frequent performer, and a member of the Theatre Tuscaloosa board of directors, is coordinating all those schedules and rehearsals, with the help of executive producer Tina F. Turley, assisted by musical direction from Leslie Poss.

"After we polled the audience, we literally did a spreadsheet and looked at what people really wanted to see again, first and foremost," Turley said. A few of the choices weren't do-able, for various reasons — maybe the original performer wasn't available, and as much as possible, Theatre Tuscaloosa has brought back original performers — so the group extrapolated next-best choices.

Though there'll be some staging and choreography, including the much-requested hand-jive piece from Alabama Stage and Screen Hall of Fame performances, the gala will for the most part be a concert, with performers in formal attire.

"We're giving the essence of a song, or a scene, a couple snippets of a monologue," Turley said. "We're going to walk down memory lane."

One of the things Adam Miller was tasked with, after being hired as managing director about five years ago, is compiling and tracking the group's history. Starting from the formation of Tuscaloosa Community Players in 1971, which later joined with a once-a-year entity called SummerShow to become Theatre Tuscaloosa in the '80s, this is the 43rd season overall.

The Bean-Brown, named because of a major gift from A.H. Bean, who dedicated it to his wife, Josephine May Bean, and his daughter, Billie Sue Bean Brown — their portraits hang in the lobby — opened in 1998 with a season of musicals. Miller noticed the anniversary coming as they were pulling things together for the 2013-14 season.

"We should celebrate that," he said, laughing. "People are constantly shocked, saying 'Don't y'all still perform in the Bama?' and I say, 'Actually we've been at the Bean-Brown for 15 years.'"

The offices had been opened in the then-new Shelton State Community College facility for about a year before the theater could be completed. Staff used to stare out onto the space and envision the shows to come, Turley said.

The group's first full-time artistic director, Paul K. Looney, shepherded Theatre Tuscaloosa through scattered offices and storage spaces downtown, while most shows were performed at the Bama Theatre. Looney sketched out ideas long before the plan could be realized and consulted with architects on the needs for the new space, including backstage shop and storage, rehearsal and recital areas, costume shop, box office, working offices and more.

Turley, who was running the ticket office 15 years ago as the theater was constructed, noted "It's spoiling" for a company to have its own spaces to work, build and rehearse in, instead of rehearsing in one room, building costumes in another, sets in yet another, loading everything in trucks to unload at the performance area just a few

days out, and then frantically trying to make it all fit before show time.

"I remember directing shows at the Bama," she said. "The Bama's romantic ... and it was a joy to be in that space, because of the history of it." The Bama, opened in 1938 as a movie palace, was converted to performance capabilities in the late '70s, when megaplex theaters drove single-screen venues out of business.

"But from a practical standpoint, we needed this. Space is a valuable commodity," she said.

Michael Thomas Walker, who's been working in film and theater out of New York City since his 2003 graduation from the University of Alabama, is coming back as a guest artist this summer to direct "Hairspray." In town for auditions recently, Walker noted that living in New York starves you for space. He marveled that he'd be able to rehearse "Hairspray" on the same stage it'll be performed on.

"He said, 'I forgot how big the Publix is,' " Turley said, laughing. "We were in Walgreens, and he said, 'You can do a show in the aisles.' "

Having all your crew together under one roof cuts down on time constraints and stress and allows you to do your best work.

"It just makes life better," Turley said.

Wednesday's rehearsal was the first with most of the performers in one space at one time.

"I was having some emotional recall," she said. "I was weepy and yet joyous. People always ask me what my favorite show is, and I always say the one I'm working on at the time.

"But to hear Ava sing anything; she can take me right back into the moment. Hearing Doff Procter sing again ... there's just a lot of great memories going on.

"It was a family reunion."

"Command Performance" will include an opening reception in the Wilson Carr Rehearsal Hall at 6:30 p.m., followed by performances at 7:30, ending with a closing reception celebration. Tickets are \$50 and include admission to both receptions and a reserved seat at the show. You can buy them online at www.theatretusc.com or by calling 205-391-2277.

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