

by Joel Samberg

A funny thing happened on the way to the soap factory

You've worked hard all day. You have pressure. You need a distraction. But you're tired of fighting with the video store clerk about those annoying rewinding fees. And you no longer can stand going to movie theatres with screens the size of your fireplace. Forget walking around the mall. That stopped being fun when you graduated high school. Television? No—you're sick of *Survivor* and Regis Philbin. How about reading? No way—that 196-page document you had to approve at work today is all the reading you plan on doing until 2010.



The Players Guild of Leonia is located in the Civil War Drill Hall Theatre.

But what else is there?

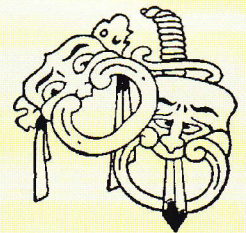
Well, the last thing you'd like to do is go to your dentist. But that's what a lot of people are doing. And the next to last thing you'd like to do is visit a firehouse. But that, too, is something quite a few of your friends and neighbors are discovering can be quite a pleasant diversion.

That's because some of those dentists are moonlighting as actors, and some of those firehouses are actually little theatres. Community theatre is alive and well and living in towns and villages all across the

country, and Bergen County is one of the hot spots. Not just in old, converted firehouses, either, but in churches, schools, community centers, even Civil War armories. And joining the dentists on stage and backstage are lawyers, accountants, marketing directors, homemakers, teachers, retirees, students—even a few pets. (What would *Annie* be without Sandy?)

Our Town

Community theatre is one of the most overburdened, under-appreciated, yet resilient entertainments we have for local enjoyment. For not much more than the cost of a few videocassette rentals, you can see remarkably good renditions of everything from *Toys in the Attic* to *Fiddler on the Roof*. Comedies, dramas, musicals, revues, and even original plays are being presented by groups such as The Radburn Players of Fair Lawn, The Bergen County Players in Oradell, The Garage Theatre Group in Tenafly, the Village Players in Ho-Ho-Kus, The Teaneck New Theatre, The Players Guild of Leonia and a dozen or so others throughout the county.



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It is an overburdened medium simply because many little theatres have to struggle just to stay afloat. Overhead is high (rents, lighting equipment, printed programs) and profits are low. (Many are non-profit corporations, but that doesn't mean they can afford to lose money.) It is under-appreciated because despite good reviews and word-of-mouth, it will forever battle the unfair stigma of being a rank-amateur enterprise in a hard-bench environment. But it is resilient because plenty of people jump at the chance to get involved and take theatre's age-old motto that the show must go with enormous sincerity.

When potential audiences find out that they can travel less than ten minutes to be swept into a story convincingly told by people who know how to tap into emotions from laughter to tears, they often become fans of community theatre for life.

"All of us love the theatre," declares John Cavada, publicity chairman of The Players Guild of Leonia. "Our theatre attracts quite a variety of professions, but we also have people who are students of the theatre, in both high school and college. That gives us a level of seriousness that you can't ignore."

Broadway Unbound

What makes Bergen County stand apart from thousands of other communities is its proximity to Broadway. "Sometimes I think that there's somewhat less theatre here than there otherwise would be if not for how close we are to Manhattan," says Michael Bias, artistic director of The Garage Theatre Group. "By the same token, our theatre pulls in talent from all over, *including* New York City." That's a testament to community theatre's allure. It is modest enough to be able to accept just about any wannabe actor or director who wishes to volunteer, but solid enough to satisfy even the most compelling creative need.

Still, community theatre managers are divided on the question of whether or not The Great White Way adds to or subtracts from the world of community theatre in Bergen County. Both the Players Guild of Leonia and the Teaneck New Theatre think that there is *more* community theatre here simply because of the local demographics. "We have a very large audience of senior citizens," explains Teaneck New Theatre publicity director Harriet Gottlieb. "Many seniors are show goers. They're hungry for good theatre, but on limited incomes they can't go into Manhattan as often as they'd like to." Community theatre is the next best thing.

John Cavada of The Players Guild concurs. "A lot of older people can't afford or simply don't want to cross the river," he says, "so they come here and have just as good a time. Sometimes even better."

Like a few other community theatre groups, The Garage Theatre is both a youth company and a professional operation, and interestingly enough, the youth company fares much better financially than its professional sibling (which operates under guidelines of Actors Equity). That's partially because for "professional" theatre, Bergen County residents do indeed prefer Manhattan, whereas the pride they feel in seeing their own young people perform as if they *were* professionals holds a tremendous amount of appeal. The youth group division of The Garage Theatre recently put on *The King and I* and *School House Rock* and will soon present *Tommy* and *Hair*. Prices for adults average about \$17.50, and about \$7.50 for students—good shows at decent prices, which is what most Bergen County community theatres seem to strive for.



Hello Gypsy

"People think they're coming to see a kiddie show and are blown away by the talent they see on stage," Bias adds. "The problem, of course, is that we don't have a home base. We perform in different high schools and community centers. We're going into our tenth season and we're still looking for a permanent home. I guess you can say we're a bunch of gypsies."

The Teaneck New Theatre does have a permanent home, but keeping it is almost as difficult as making Peter Pan fly without wires. The group performs at the 100-seat

Bogart Memorial Church in Bogota, but since the church's congregational numbers are down, it rents out to an increasingly wide variety of other groups to help defray costs which, in the words of Harriet Gottlieb, forces the church to "squeeze our productions" into its annual calendar.

Like many community theatres, the Teaneck New Theatre has to devote perhaps more time to its fiscal challenges than it does to its artistic pursuits. The church charges the group for space usage not only for each performance, but also for each rehearsal. But its artistic pursuits thrive nonetheless, because theatre is in the blood of so many of its volunteers. Recent productions, all of which were well-received, included *Bus Stop*, *Steel Magnolias*, and *The Lion in Winter*, all of which is basically adult fare for

serious audiences. *Deathtrap*, *The House of Bernarda Alba* (a Fredrici Garcia Lorca drama that many theatre students must examine sometime during their studies) and *The Last Red Wagon Tent Show in the World* are slated for later this year and the first half of 2002. *The Last Red Wagon* is an original musical about a traveling circus that was written and composed by musician, playwright and theatre critic Linda Eisenstein.

Cities of Angels

Many community theatre groups go back decades, with histories that can be best described as a creative alliance of comedy and tragedy. They have had hits and misses. They have had smooth sailing and have run into almost insurmountable problems. Throughout it all, they have continually derived strength from their volunteers, and sometimes from compassionate, philanthropic people in their community—and the shows always do go on.

The Bergen County Players is approaching its seventieth year and now boasts about 350 members who work on-stage, backstage, and everywhere in between, in as many as eight shows a year in its Little Firehouse Theatre in Oradell. It, too, has original productions every once in a while, most recently *Thumbs*, by Tony Award-winning playwright Rupert Holmes (who used to live in Tenafly). The group recently finished *City of Angels* and is currently working on *How I Learned to Drive*. Upcoming are *Snow White Goes West*, *Epic Proportions*, and *Murder in Green Meadows*.

Perhaps more than any other community theatre in the area, the Bergen County Players has truly been a band of gypsies. They began performing at the YMCA in Hackensack in 1932, which they outgrew by 1940. So they rented an unused soap factory in River

Edge, which burned down in 1944. They picked up their pieces and went to the Little Barn Theatre at Bergen Junior College (now part of Fairleigh Dickenson University). In 1949, the town of Oradell built a new firehouse, and the intrepid theatre group negotiated to take



over the old one. Many improvements have been made since then, but the enthusiasm and dedication has remained the same.

Possible Dreams

The Players Guild of Leonia once defined the word gypsy almost better than any other group, at least until 1995. "We're the oldest continuous theatre group in the state of New Jersey," declares the group's John Cavada. "We've done at least one play a year since we began, and three or four a year for quite some time now. We performed in high schools for a few years, and even did outdoor shows in parks. But six years ago we agreed to take over a 142-year-old Civil War-era drill hole and armory for \$1 a year, if we agreed to bring it up to code. That's what we did, and we've been there ever since."

The group, a non-profit corporation, was founded in 1919. In addition to plays such as *Sylvia* and *Man of LaMancha* (both in 2001), they sponsor special readings, musical evenings, holiday and children's theatre, film series and historic presentations. The Radburn Players is also seventy years old, now making its home at Grange Hall in Fair Lawn. (In the summer they perform at Winkin Stage, also in Fair Lawn). Recent shows have included *South Pacific* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, with *The Lion in Winter* as the production currently on tap. Tickets are \$12, and like most community theatres, there are group rates.

In addition to The Garage Theatre, there are some other professional stages in Bergen County as options, most notably The John Harms Theatre in Englewood. This season marks its twenty-fifth anniversary, during which tribute is being paid to John Harms, the gifted performer who led the effort to restore the original building, The Plaza, Englewood's 1926 art deco silent movie theatre and vaudeville house, into the current facility. On its stage is a wide variety of entertainments, from the Neville Brothers and Marcel Marceau, to *The Nutcracker* and Three Irish Tenors. Even some musicals like *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, *H.M.S. Pinalore* and *Big River* play there. The difference, of course, is that you go home after a show at John Harms and simply re-read the program, whereas after seeing a community theatre play, you can go home and tell your dentist how good he was.

