

## CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

## Meadow Brook Theatre's delicate balancing act

The lack of a thriving theater community in the metro region is the main reason for the current dilemma facing Meadow Brook Theatre.

Call it the "Can't Be Everything to Everyone" Syndrome.

For better or worse, Meadow Brook is expected to present what a community of theaters offer in other major cities.

That's the reality. Unfair? Anyone who has chosen theater as a profession knows better than to expect fairness.

These days, the most compelling drama might be how a regional theater can survive the competition from movie houses, videos, the boob tube and the latest cash-cow Broadway revival in town.

It isn't easy. And it's far from simple.

### As the crossroads

After the spring departure of artistic director Geoffrey Sherman, and the selection of a less than exciting season schedule, some have contended that Meadow Brook has meandered off course.

Shouldn't it be producing cutting-edge material? What about a commitment to the classics? Did anyone mention work by contemporary playwrights? How about reaching out to diversify its mostly white, suburban audience?

The question, of course, is what direction was Meadow Brook moving in the first place?

For the present time, the direction is clearly inward.

"This is a year of planning," said Debra Wicks, interim director. "Taking hard look at ourselves is a major step forward."

Admittedly Meadow Brook is at a crossroads unlike at any other time in its 30-year history. And its first order of business is to find ways to please those people who support the theater — season ticket-holders, said Wicks.

**Too quick to judge**

Two years ago Wicks portrayed the vivacious and outrageous Ghost of Christmas Present in Meadow Brook's annual "A Christmas Carol."

Today Wicks' role is more mundane but will require every bit of that theatrical magic.

Likewise many other theater companies, Meadow Brook faces the stark reality of balancing art with bottom-line economics.

And it's up to Wicks, the one-time Missouri farm girl, to increase ticket sales while helping to formulate a strategic five-year plan for the theater.

Some critics in a confession here is necessary) have been too quick to judge the upcoming season's selection of plays. While it is, by anyone's standard, a conservative line-up, there's more to the season than meets the eye.

And that, in any language, is spelled M-O-N-E-Y.

**A tenuous bond**

"This season we've looked at what the subscriber-base wanted," said

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Pack 'em in: Last year's "Arts, Beats & Eats" festival in downtown Pontiac was a popular and critical success. Organizers expect this year's expanded festival to attract more than 700,000 people.

BY FRANK PROVENZANO  
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It's nearly half-an-hour past the scheduled meeting time, and there's no sign of Jon Witz.

And to say the least, that's unusual. Especially along the gritty streets of downtown Pontiac, where, for the past 18 months, Witz has been a prominent talking billboard promoting his pet project, "Arts, Beats & Eats," a four-day arts festival labeled as the city's latest hope for economic renewal.

Witz and his staff have been working nearly around the clock, holed up on the fourth floor in one of downtown Pontiac's high-rises along Saginaw Street, where 750,000 visitors are expected to stroll during the second annual "Arts, Beats & Eats" festival over Labor Day weekend.

When Witz arrives at the meeting to discuss this year's expanded festival, he appears as a modern-day promoter. He lumbers, down the side-

walk, as a linebacker in search of prey, clutching a beefy briefcase and pressing a cell phone to his ear.

"I'm a promoter and it's easy to promote something you believe in," said Witz, who oversaw promotions for Clubland and the State Theater in downtown Detroit in the early 1990s before opening his own promotions firm in 1994.

While Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson and Pontiac Mayor Walter Moore provide the political clout behind the festival, Witz is in the day-to-day pursuit of transforming downtown Pontiac into a thriving marketplace festival that resembles Taste of Chicago and the Ann Arbor Art Fairs.

When Witz predicted that 250,000 would attend last year's inaugural festival, many thought that it was merely promotional rhetoric. After all, "Arts, Beats & Eats" is held on the same holiday weekend as the popular Montreux Detroit Jazz Festival, Michigan Renaissance Festival and Michigan State Fair.

Witz's prediction was, indeed, slightly off. In fact, it was too low. Nearly 400,000 showed up on the downtown streets during a late summer sweltering spell.

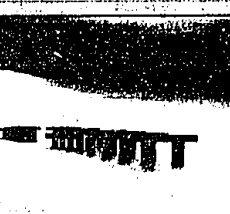
### Diversity is key

"We've come further and faster than anyone expected," he said. "The key is diversity in what is presented and a diverse audience."

Diversity at "Arts, Beats & Eats" translates into a range of art work, music and foods. The selection of artists, restaurateurs and special activities, according to Witz, is intended to appeal to every ethnic group and taste in the region.

The festival also takes pride in attracting families to the many special activities for children, including an expanded tent area for art exercises, games and performances.

More than 220 artists' booths will



Mystical: The photography of William P. Thayer of Redford is among the featured work in the fine arts exhibit at "Arts, Beats & Eats."

## Expecting a charm the second time

EXPANDED 'ARTS, BEATS & EATS' QUICKLY BECOMING A CAN'T MISS CULTURAL CELEBRATION



STAFF PHOTO BY JIM SACCHETTO

Urban environs: Promoter Jon Witz (left) and Lisa Konikow, coordinator of the fine arts exhibit, are finalizing details for the upcoming "Arts, Beats & Eats" festival.

been selected from among more than 700 applications, up from less than 100 inquiries last year, said Lisa Konikow, who coordinates the fine arts exhibit.

The emphasis is more on two-dimensional work, especially painting and photography, she said.

After last year, the art fair component of the festival was included among the top 200 best in country,

Please see FESTIVAL, C2

## Honoring those who pushed the aviation frontier

BY FRANK PROVENZANO  
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Ask Philip Handelman a question — any question — about planes or aviation history, and expect to listen. Actually, you might want to take a seat for an unexpectedly long, albeit intensely fascinating, flight.

There are no short answers when it comes to Handelman's explanation about the men and machines of the great beyond.

"I try to provide the context in which to understand how and why the aircraft was conceived and applied," said Handelman from his private air strip, 25 miles north of his home in Birmingham.



Take flight: Local author Philip Handelman, a renowned aviation historian, has co-edited a collection of stories about heroic feats in the air.

In the northern edge of Oakland County, Handelman maintains a research library along with a collection of original aviation art and antique airplanes, including his pride and joy, a World War II vintage Stearman that has been restored to all of its bright-yellow glory.

Handelman and Walter Boyne, former director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum, have collaborated in editing a collection of writings entitled "Brassey's Air Combat Reader: Historic Feats and Aviation Legends."

The book, published in May by Brassey, presents varied accounts of the evolution of wartime aviation, from the bombs lobbed in the early days of World War I to the great battles of the sky in the World War II to the modern-day reliance on high-tech gadgetry.

"Through Vietnam aviation combat was about good hand-eye coordination. Basically, out-flying the other guy," said Handelman.

"Today, whoever controls the electronic environment wins," he said. "We saw this decisively in the early 1980s when Israel's (flying state-of-the-art combat planes) scored lopsided victory over the Syrian (less sophisticated) MiGs in the fight for control of the

Please see AVIATION, C2

## EDUCATION

## Students to jam at Montreux Detroit Jazz Fest

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN  
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Julie Bailey never forgot the jazz improvisation clinic she participated in two years ago at the Montreux Detroit Jazz Festival.

Bailey, a senior at Farmington Harrison High School, plays trumpet in the

jazz band. At Montreux Detroit, she learned improvisation basics, and performed with her school's jazz band.

"It was a lot of fun," said Bailey who began playing trumpet in fifth grade. "There were a lot of professional jazz musicians and to be playing on the same stage it was pretty cool. It's amazing hearing some of the trumpet players. They play so high. At the improvisation clinic, I learned to play in the right key and how to feel from your heart."

This year, more than 24 high school and college bands and ensembles will perform at Montreux Detroit, including the Farmington Harrison High School Jazz Band under the direction of Mark Phillips. Educating and encouraging future jazz musicians by offering clinics and giving students a chance to perform has been part of Montreux Detroit since the festival's beginnings.

"The educational programs have expanded in the last seven years," said Jack Pierson, a former Livonia resident, who moved to Northville. Pierson

works with the educational programs committee, which includes Ernie Rodgers, Louis Smith and Paul Stanifer, director of the Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association based on the campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The goal of the committee is to make sure jazz remains a viable force.

Pierson will present a clinic 1 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 5. "We're having more high school and college bands play and improvisation clinics with all of the clinicians giving handouts," he said. "All realize the importance of jazz, it being the only true American art form. We have clinics on improvisation for those who have never improvised and then advanced improv. There are eight separate sessions open to everyone, not just students, and a meet-the-performer. Kids can come down to jam with a rhythm section."

### Educational programs

All of the programs revolve around

Please see JAZZ, C2



For the love of jazz: Farmington Harrison High School Jazz Band members Ryan Smith (left) counter-clockwise, Joe Walts, Kurt Schummer, Chris Chiappelli and Adam Marshall played at Montreux Detroit two years ago.