



THE SHOW MUST GO ON

BY L.L. WARNER



THE "ELIZA DOOLITTLES" of two eras, actresses Sally Ann Howes and Lisa O'Hare, took their seats in the first row in the West Room of the Henry Morrison Flagler Museum. Howes is playing Mrs. Higgins in Cameron Mackintosh's tour of *My Fair Lady*. She played "Eliza" on Broadway. The cast is donating a "Save the Playhouse" cabaret performance of Broadway songs to the Palm Beach Theater Guild. Meanwhile, the Guild's president, Patrick Henry Flynn, is warming up two-hundred-plus audience members with a promise that the Royal Poinciana Playhouse was—and will again be—a place where everyone in otherwise balkanized and clubby Palm Beach society can gather and enjoy themselves.

"Christian or Jew, bus boy or billionaire," Flynn said. "For a night everyone can get a reasonably-priced ticket to the Palm Beach dream." Without a meeting place and its own performing arts playhouse, "Palm Beach will be a suburb of West Palm Beach," Flynn said.

The Playhouse's fate will set the future scale, character, and tone of the town. Standing between the wrecking ball and the theater is a deed of covenant. In 1979, the current owner agreed to always keep and lease the Playhouse as a theater. The Palm Beach Theater Guild (pbtheaterguild.org) and the town are in court to uphold the 1979 deed. So far, the town has won a judgment that the covenant is legal and in effect, but the property owner is appealing. Flynn cautions that town officials' resolve to ratify landmarking and keep the deed may be waning.

"A majority of the town council is now in favor of 'redeveloping' the Plaza and Playhouse property," Flynn says. "Redevelopment" is a euphemism for destruction of the theater.

Like everything else in Palm Beach, the "Save the Playhouse" movement is spearheaded by determined, high-powered women. The co-chairs of the Theater Guild are Amanda Schumacher and Helen Guest. They have combined with Broadway theater producers like Vicki Halmos and Terry Allen Kramer, New York radio advertising mogul Ralph

Guild, and actors Christopher Plummer and Sally Ann Howes, who co-chair the Guild's Committee of Stars.

For all its glitz, "Palm Beach is still a community of families," Schumacher says. "On Fridays our family often took in a performance at the Playhouse. It was a dream world."

If the Playhouse is torn down, condos, a condo-hotel, or a hotel with large rooms poised for conversion to condos could take its place. Another faction wants the town to take the theater by eminent domain, tear it down, and build a park.

Originally a booking house for road shows, the Guild seeks to change the Playhouse into a regional subscription theater to also host Broadway tryouts, dance, music, and children's theater. Performing arts groups, like the Palm Beach Symphony, Ballet

Florida, The PlayGround Theatre, and Palm Beach Principal Players have also hastened to become performing arts partners of the Guild. The Guild will honor these and other partners at a Club Colette luncheon hosted by Schumacher on January 17.

"We've been here since 1972," says Guild co-chair and social fixture, Helen Guest. "The Playhouse was a great socializing place and can be again. It's unthinkable that this town—with all our wealth and appreciation for the arts—won't have its own performing arts center." John Phipps, a cousin of Guest's husband, commissioned John Volk to build the theater in 1958. The Guests also sponsored the "Palm Beach Follies," a charity benefit that spoofed the manners and morals of Palm Beach. Flynn promises a new edition of the follies "as soon as the owner will lease or sell us the theater."

The Guild's writers are already considering skits: a Dina Merrill-type knocking on the door of Mar-a-Lago (her home when she grew up, now a club), where she asks a Donald Trump look-a-like for her old room back. "You have to

This page, above: Black-tie opening night at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse. Left: Bob Davidoff, the Playhouse's chief photographer, ready to snap shots of the actors. Opposite: Overlooking the theater's 878 seats from the proscenium stage, which is still in excellent condition.



see the show to find out if the Donald-like character asks for a consideration," Flynn says.

Merrill serves on the Committee of Stars, and like other members, which includes Tammy Grimes, Julie Harris, and Arlene Dahl, she has headlined shows at the Playhouse. Edward Albee, who had his works performed at the theater and grew up in Palm Beach, has also signed on and hosted the Guild's fall party in New York. Actors love the house for its plush intimacy and extraordinary acoustics.

"The Royal Poinciana Playhouse is the perfect size with eight hundred to nine hundred seats," says Committee Co-Chair Howes, who has performed at hundreds of theatrical houses. "It's one of America's most beautiful theaters." Filming in England, Howes's co-chair on the Committee, actor Christopher Plummer (who is also a seasonal resident) echoes her concerns: "Progress isn't progress if it destroys history."

The Playhouse's fiftieth anniversary party, with Howes, Arlene Dahl, and Turner Classic Films Television host Robert Osborne, will be held on January 31 at a house on Lake Worth near the Four Arts complex.

"The classic white, gold, and red interior, and magnificent architecture of the theater, and the old guard out in all its finery made for a wonderful evening," says cabaret audience member and Citizens Association founder, Rita Taca.

A year ago, the Palm Beach Landmarks Preservation Commission voted unanimously to landmark the Playhouse and the plaza site. The site is in the oldest part of Palm Beach, it's an exquisite example of period Regency architecture by John Volk, and when it opened, a *New York Times* critic called the theater

the most beautiful in America.

"Why is this important? Because it's our history," Preservation Foundation Executive Director John Ripley says. "Historic landmarking has brought history to life in a way that reading just can't."

Despite all this, the town council has stalled the landmarking, twice refusing to hold a public hearing and vote on the matter. "All of a sudden the town council has done a 180," says Flynn. "We also are in danger that they will abandon the 1979 property use and density covenant that the court upheld."

Flynn says that the 850-seat theater is a viable niche between smaller theaters and 2,000-seat centers. The Guild's plan projects an annual operating deficit on revenues of \$3.5 million, the same as a theater-only, 250-seat venue with \$2 million in sales, and one fifth of the annual shortfall of the larger Kravis Center in West Palm Beach. According to Flynn, "the bottom line in keeping the Royal Poinciana Playhouse is that the community pays a little and wins a lot." ♦

This page, top: Ann Baxter, Hume Cronyn, and Jessica Tandy in the Playhouse's *Noel Coward in Two Keys*, 1975. Center: The badge worn by Playhouse preservationists depicts John Volk's original crown design. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Sally Ann Howes headlining the "Save the Playhouse" cabaret; A Rolls Royce pulls up to an evening show in 1962; Gertrude Berg and Tresa Hughes in *Dear Me the Sky is Falling*, 1964; The cast of *My Fair Lady* at the "Save the Playhouse" cabaret; Palm Beach Theater Guild Co-Chairs Helen Guest and Amanda Schumacher; Arlene Francis in *Janus*, 1963; Guild President Patrick Henry Flynn; Bob Cummings and daughter Melinda, who both starred in 1967's *Generation*.

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