

Fairfield Theatre Company hits the right note



Written by Laura Kenyon

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(Audra Napolitano photos)

When Simon Wardle asked some friends to pick a show from the Fairfield Theatre Company's calendar late last year, it hardly mattered that the winning act — a 1970s proto-punk guitarist named Jonathan Richman — didn't ring any bells. Nor did it faze him when a pre-show email arrived naming Hilton Valentine as the opening act.

"I didn't recognize his name at all," said Wardle, who described the Stage One Theatre as so intimate that going there is like attending a private concert. Sometimes, the only thing better than reconnecting with old favorites is discovering new acts to love (as he recently did with Silent Film and Anchor & Braille).

In the case of Hilton Valentine, however, he got to do both.

"Turned out he was the lead guitarist for the Animals back in the day," Wardle said, reminiscing about one of his all time-favorite songs. So between noshing on appetizers at Martel bistro and topping the night off at 55 Degree Wine Bar, the Wilton resident got to watch Hilton Valentine — barely a car-length away under the soft lights of the stage — perch on a barstool and strum the bluesy chords of "The House of the Rising Sun."

"It was unbelievable," he said.



One of the most common words used to describe Stage One, located in a former factory on Sanford Street, seems to be "intimate." With just 225 seats spread out in nine rows, according to recently departed FTC Managing Director Eileen O'Reilly, no one is more than 20 feet from the stage.

"If you sit in one of the front rows you are going to get sweat on by a famous musician," she said with a laugh.

"The worst thing is that it spoils you completely and it makes any other place just seem not as good because of the closeness to the musicians and the closeness to home," said Ridge Cromwell, whose favorite experience at Stage One involves The English Beat and a room full of people "dancing and grooving" to the music.

The Fairfield resident has been a member of the Fairfield Theatre Company "since the early days."

The "early days" date to 2001 at Fairfield University, where the company's inaugural season focused on dramatic theater. The next year, it began leasing and renovating the building at 70 Sanford Street, owned by the town of Fairfield, with the goal of eventually creating a year-round, multi-venue arts and cultural center. Stage One opened there in 2004 with plays like *The Moonlight Room*, *The Internationalist* and *Carnival Knowledge*.



It wasn't long after the curtain rose at the new venue, however, that the financial troubles did the same. Like most not-for-profits, any money the theater company raises goes "right back into the building," said O'Reilly. "That's a risky proposition for any business because you have to sell out every time to pay all your bills."

"The reality was it wasn't financial supportable," Artistic Director John Reid said about the company's original vision. "So the FTC thought about it and said, let's just book a contemporary musical act. What happened was the community responded, and tickets sold, and people came and asked when the next show was."

When the company received support for a Sunday jazz series in 2005, according to O'Reilly, things began to change.

"The musicians got on stage and said, you have a little gem here, acoustics-wise," she said.

It soon became apparent that selling a musical act was easier and more reliable than selling an off-Broadway show. In the case of the latter, the ticket sales alone almost never cover the cost of the production, which can run for weeks and needs to be publicized the entire time. Musicians, on the other hand, simply roll up in a van, perform, and continue on their way.

Now, the theater company holds roughly 200 performances a year, most at Stage One with some at Bridgeport's Klein Memorial Auditorium. While the majority of these events are of the musical variety, the company also hosts a cabaret workshop for teenagers and kids; a monthly film series; movie screenings; comedians; staged readings; and benefit concerts for groups such as Operation Hope, Make A Wish Foundation, and Connecticut Challenge.

In 2010, it also partnered with Kids Empowered by Your Support to provide musical instruction to underserved children of Bridgeport and surrounding communities. According to Reid, who is just eight months into his current position, this program benefits both the children who learn to play an instrument and the Fairfield students who act as mentors. He hopes to expand it in the near future.

"I think our evolution is really to become a very vital hands-on resource for the community," said O'Reilly. "I hope in a few years we're going to meet musicians who say, I learned to play at FTC. I saw my first show at FTC."

Also on Reid's list are building a stronger support base, adding a second venue for the theater (if finances allow), and expanding the types of music audiences get to experience.

In the past few years, Stage One has welcomed performers ranging from Juliette Lewis to the Verve Pipe to Loudon Wainwright III. The Klein has made headlines with powerhouse acts such as the Doobie Brothers, the Disco Biscuits,

and the Wailers.

Reid described the FTC's musical style as American contemporary, and said he hopes to reach into some genres that aren't "as commercially successful," including classical and jazz.

Despite some recent criticism that FTC's evolution has alienated its original audience, Reid believes the changes were in direct response to the community.

"The Fairfield Theatre Company began to understand what the community really wanted, and what the community really wanted was live music and not to have to go to New York to hear some of these bands," he said "The best artists in the world really come here."

And when the "best artists in the world" flock to downtown Fairfield, their fans follow — 25,000 a year according to FTC estimates — bringing along their appetites, friends and wallets.

Wardle, who lives in Wilton, says he sees at least one show a month at Stage One. Almost each time, he heads to dinner at one of the local restaurants or ends the evening with a nightcap at a neighborhood bar. He's even passed the word on to other out-of-towners, including those who shared his Hilton Valentine moment.

"I know that they have been back a few times," he said, "including last week when they took their daughter there on her 21st birthday."

Linda Matthews, past executive assistant at the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce, does not underestimate the effect Stage One has had on the local economy.

"The patrons of the arts have definitely brought business into downtown Fairfield," she said, "stopping at restaurants and shops in the time before they see a performance. I would definitely agree that the theater company has brought some more business into Fairfield."

"They are definitely helping jump-start the Fairfield economy," said Wardle, "one concert at a time."

In order to keep the music playing and reach its ultimate goal of having a multi-venue arts center, the Fairfield Theatre Company relies on its 1,300 members, donations, sponsorships, and traditional fund-raisers.

On Nov. 3, it will celebrate a decade of music at Stage One. Details and information about sponsorship may be found by contacting Brinda Pola at bpola@fairfieldtheatre.org .

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