



Guiding Star

by Jerry Lemoine-Vreeland

photo © 2008 AbbyPhoto, LLC

The North Star Theatre in beautiful Old Mandeville has reopened its doors! After being dark since Katrina, the local landmark turned on the stage lights again in December 2007.

WITH THE NORTH STAR, artistic director-owner Lori Bennett offers a double gift to the community. Not only does she provide wonderful, wholesome entertainment—she also takes a genuine interest in the future of the young actors she is molding.

Lori comes by her love of the arts naturally, as her grandmother, a concert pianist and opera singer, provided her with inspiration as well as singing lessons. After attending college, Lori left her home state of California and moved to New York to refine her theatrical abilities. It was in the heart of the Big Apple that the aspiring actress studied at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre. This opened doors for her, and she eventually landed parts in soap operas and other television programs.

With that experience, she moved back to California where she produced shows, one of which was a special starring Sammy Davis Jr. and the Rat Pack. She later married and, in the '70s, moved to New Orleans, working at the Beverly Dinner Playhouse. Being the outstanding professional that

she is, Lori climbed the ladder to the top and held the position of president until the Playhouse closed its doors after a fire in 1983. This led her across the lake. In 1991, she purchased the historic building on Girod Street in Mandeville and expanded it to provide space for the North Star Theatre. She says, “My main thrust in the future is to provide a creative outlet for the people in the community and produce shows that people can really enjoy.”

Lori’s love of acting goes much deeper than the ambiance of the theatre. Her true interest is the development of young actors. Currently, she is offering a summer youth program and, later in the summer, she will reactivate her Teen Troupe. In the fall, she will begin working with adults with her “49ers Theatre Corps.”

The process that Lori employs with all the workshops is to first familiarize newcomers with theatre terminology, introduce theatre exercises and games, and move on to improvisation. The budding actors then graduate to scene and monologue work

Lori Bennett on the set at North Star Theatre in Mandeville.

and, once they are ready, act in a Showcase so they can become accustomed to working with an audience. Lori then tries to cast them in a small part in one of her productions and works with them to explore their potential. She says, "A theatre is really a small city, and it must be populated with a variety of talents and abilities."

North Star Theatre is a combination of such proficiencies. Working under an agreement with the Actors Equity Association of New York, Lori uses both professional and non-professional actors and directors. She is also a member of the Theatre Communications Group in New York, which is a league of professional non-profit theatres. Lori applied for and obtained the status of non-profit, which was granted under the corporate name of United Theatre Artists, Inc. This enables her to solicit support from

individuals and corporations and to apply for grants. She is well aware that without this support, theatre cannot survive. On a recent visit to Australia, she had a private tour of the Sydney Opera House, which has seven stages and a huge staff. After attending several performances, she mentioned that the theatres were not full and asked how they made it financially. "Oh, the City of Sydney covers our deficit" was the answer. This is also true in many European countries. Lori recognizes the need for such help in the United States.

In order to make the most of each performance, Lori books plays very loosely and eschews a rigid schedule of plays. To quote the energetic artist, "In the first few years, we did an announced season until we did 'A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline,' which ran for six months. (10,000 people came to see it.) Subsequently, although I have tentative productions in the works, we prefer not to announce a production until we are sure we can cast it appropriately and have the production staff in place. So many of our shows have been held over that this works for us. Another important factor is that, because of our professional status, we can often get the licensing for producing new works for the first time in the Southern Region. For example, when I read 'All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,' we



photo © 2008 Thomas B. Grovstein



photo © 2008 AbbyPhoto, LLC

Above: The North Star Theatre in its historic location in Old Mandeville.
Left: The North Star Theatre is lit once again after over two years of darkness.

applied for licensing and got it years before it became the theatre staple it is now, and even took it on tour. We have done this with a number of shows. This aspect is important, as audiences enjoy a mixture of the ‘tried and true,’ as well as fresh works. The other consideration is that when we find someone of extraordinary talent and wish to get them involved, we must schedule around their availability. We have brought actors and directors in from California and New York and have also produced new works from other areas for the first time.”

Reading about Lori only begins to tell of her creativity. To appreciate the fruits of her labor, you must attend one of her plays. First, the ambiance of the old building housing the theatre is a delight. You feel the excitement in the air. My husband and I attended a showing of “Time Out for Ginger.” Settled



Photo © 2008 AbbyPhoto, LLC

in our seats, we saw Lori sitting in the last row, her expert eyes focused on every movement of her chosen cast. All seemed to play their parts perfectly—testimony to the success of her workshops and Teen Troupe.

All of the actors seem dedicated to Lori. Some have attended her classes for years. Katie Welty, who played Cousin Lizzie in “Time Out for Ginger,” has been with North Star since second grade. Now a sophomore at St. Scholastica Academy, her training is evident. This training, when paired with Lori’s ability to cast the right actor in the right role, produced a character that was a perfect fit for Katie’s demure, reserved demeanor.

Ed Morvant, who played the part of Ginger’s father, praises Lori. According to Ed, she knows how to get the best from her actors and loves what she is doing. “She can really make you feel good about yourself,” he says. His affiliation with Lori goes back to the days at the Beverly Dinner Playhouse, where he



was an actor, singer and dancer. Ed choreographed the curtain call in “Time Out for Ginger,” where the whole cast was on stage jitterbugging to the music of the ‘50s—a fantastic ending that was a true crowd pleaser.

Debbie Morvant (Ed’s on-stage wife, but no real-life relation) has 25 years of acting experience. She, too, has been nurtured by Lori. She notes, “Lori is a wonderful director and teacher. She brings to her actors some of the superior training that she received at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre in New York City.”

Weston Twardowski played Eddie Davis in “Time Out for Ginger.” A junior at Fontainebleau High School, he won a grant to build the school’s performance space and, in return, the school named it “The Weston Twardowski Stage.” Like his fellow cast members, Weston greatly admires Lori, whom he describes as a “blast.” “Lori is an exceptional blend. It is unusual to find someone who excels in every aspect of the theatre, but Lori does.”

The historic building at the corner of Girod and Madison Streets is certainly no longer in darkness. The stars—and their guiding star—are shining brightly. So find a seat and enjoy the show. You are in for a treat.

Interested in being part of the theatre? “We always need volunteers in every area,” says Lori. “A call to our production office starts the process. Just call 985-624-5266 and ask for me.”

Left: New Orleans chef Paul Prudhomme has a reserved seat for Lori’s shows at the North Star Theatre. Right: The cast of “Time Out for Ginger” poses outside the theatre.