

20 Years in the Zone

by Kara Moyer

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A PREMIERE PROFESSIONAL musical theatre company in Naples, TheatreZone, has a significant milestone to celebrate this year. 2025 marks their 20th anniversary season and they are commemorating it by presenting five meticulously selected and award-winning Broadway and Off-Broadway musicals.

This monumental achievement is ultimately thanks to the brainstorming and eventual leap of faith of its founders, husband and wife, Mark and Karen Danni. Originally from New York, the Dannis had already achieved remarkable success and accolades in the world of performing arts before TheatreZone's existence; Mark first as a percussionist, then conductor, and eventually director, and Karen as an actress and choreographer.

In 2002, the pair accepted positions with Naples Players Theatre as director and choreographer, respectively, for their production of *Oklahoma*. Three years later, while back in New York City, Mark Danni was approached with the prospect of developing a new student theatre program on the campus of The Community School in Naples. After first declining, then reopening discussions and negotiating, Danni agreed, but under non-negotiable conditions: the theatre must acquire a contract with the Actors Equity Association and be registered as a non-profit 501(c)3. All parties agreed, and the Dannis relocated to Naples.

The Actors Equity Association is an American labor union representing upwards of 50,000 professionally trained actors and managers working in the live theatre performance industry. Members must apply and pay dues to receive status as AEA-certified and show proof that they have been legally and professionally paid for their work.

As part of TheatreZone's contract, at least 60% of every performance must be staffed by members of

the AEA, including the Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Manager. The remaining 40% are local and national talent, including but not limited to partnerships with the theatre and stage management programs at Florida Gulf Coast University and The Community School's Upper School program, which Danni also administrates.

When asked what sets TheatreZone apart from other theatres in the area, Danni is emphatic that AEA staffing has an enormous impact. "These are actors who do this for a living." It's important to note, it's not just actors. Singers, dancers, and musicians also audition and are hired for each performance, inevitably raising the bar on theatre performances in southwest Florida with the experience and level of talent they bring to each show.

While AEA members make up more than half of all casting, most behind-the-scenes crews are in-residence. Costumes, set design, and sound are constructed and designed from the ground up on site. Lighting designers are hired nationwide depending upon what each show requires, as well as conductors and music directors.

Danni, although extensively trained and with an impressive background in musical conducting, is now the head Director of every performance and hires out musical conductors and directors.

Every production involves a montage of talent nets cast both far and wide, ensuring the highest quality of performance from orchestra to scenic painting, what the audience sees and doesn't, and everything in between.

TheatreZone productions are performed in the intimate, 250-seat G & L Theatre, which is smaller than most theatre companies in the area.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a negative review online over the years, but rather countless praises for their extraordinary performances and smaller venue



Mark Danni

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that makes each show feel like an immersive, exhilarating, even interactive experience.

A smaller venue can sometimes pose its challenges when choosing shows, as not all are conducive to 'intimate settings.' When asking Danni to elaborate on his selection process for each season, he explains, "I try to look at the season as a whole, so if you come to see all our shows you will see a variety—funny, thought provoking, touching, thrilling..."

His formula, 20 years in, is clearly working. This season's penultimate show is *Jersey Boys*, the wildly popular 2006 Tony Award winning musical and one of the longest running Broadway shows in history. It doesn't premiere until March, and they've already added an extra show date due to such strong ticket sales. *Ghost*, the musical adaptation of the 1990 Academy Award winning movie, closes out the season in June.

Combining a high-energy, high-profile show followed with one rife with heartbreak and longing could be considered a daring move, but Danni has found a way to appeal to a vast array of audiences with his performance selections, and always manages to secure licensing for major hits. Previous seasons have included *Camelot*, *Gypsy*, and *Amadeus*, among numerous others.

For the last eight seasons, except for 2020 (due to the Covid-19 pandemic), *Home for the Holidays* has been featured annually as their holiday program. A southwest Florida original, Danni created this musical specifically for TheatreZone. It's customized every year to always engage new patrons and re-enchanted returning ones with a mix of classic and popular Christmas songs all set to original dance routines choreographed by Karen Danni. *Home for the Holidays* also routinely showcases

local, upcoming talent, or, as their website describes, 'young stars of the future.'

Two concerts complement the five-show season this year and both are already sold out. When included in the season, the concert series features a blend of storytelling, singers, songwriters, and bands, and commonly highlights legends like Elvis Presley and Simon & Garfunkel. The Mersey Beatles, a tribute band to the Fab Four, make a return to TheatreZone this year to celebrate yet another historic anniversary: 60 years since The Beatles played their infamous Shea Stadium concert.

While auditions take place the September before the upcoming season, it's almost incomprehensible, after seeing a performance at TheatreZone, that the entire musical production comes together with only nine rehearsals in ten days. The choreography, music, and stage blocking are modified and set Monday through Thursday, and then, as Danni refers to it, they "stumble through" to iron out kinks on Friday.

The band or orchestra rehearses Saturday while design crews devise plans of action, and Sunday is a much-deserved day off for cast members, while also allowing space and time for lighting, set, and costumes to be

constructed. Monday through Wednesday, all cast and crew join for rehearsals, with a final dress rehearsal on Wednesday. It's curtains up Thursday evening. Impressive, to say the least, but also not surprising given the high caliber of professional acting and extensive experience TheatreZone is known for providing year after year.

In keeping with their intimate setting, TheatreZone recently introduced a 'Talk Back' program on the second Thursday of each musical performance. Audiences are offered the opportunity to stay after the show's end, at no extra cost, for an unscripted question and answer session with the cast and directors. Providing this extra experience further immerses the audience in the world of live musical theatre, with a supreme element of patron appreciation.

When reflecting on the last 20 years, and looking forward to the next, Danni is direct and absolute in his goals for the future, "To continue to grow and produce high quality theatre in southwest Florida."

He is also quick to acknowledge that TheatreZone wouldn't be where it is today without its loyal patrons. As a non-profit, community support and continued engagement is an integral component of the theatre's past achievements and future endeavors. That support, combined with Danni's steadfast determination and focus in the director's chair, make it easy to believe that TheatreZone's next 20 years will be nothing short of show-stopping. •

TheatreZone's 20th anniversary season runs through June 15. Performances are in the G & L Theatre on the Naples Community School campus, located at 13275 Livingston Rd. in Naples. For information, call 888-966-3352.



TheatreZone's productions are staged in the G & L Theater on The Community School of Naples campus.