

Arts & Entertainment

Local Performers Celebrate The Arts at Jersey Gardens Mall

By MARYLOU MORANO

Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

AREA - Jersey Gardens Mall, New Jersey's largest outlet mall, recently held "Art in the Gardens," a month-long celebration of the arts that included several local performers.

An annual occurrence observing National Arts and Humanities Month, the Union County Division of Cultural and Heritage Affairs and the Department of Economic Development coordinates "Art in the Gardens."

This year's performers included the Shubanjali School of Performing Arts, Inc. of Scotch Plains, the Chinese American Music Ensemble (CAME) of Westfield and Westfield pianist Gil Scott Chapman.

Mr. Chapman, a junior at Westfield High School (WHS), performed a mix of jazz, classical and traditional gospel selections. Beethoven's "Sonata" and George Gershwin's "Summertime" were two of the musical pieces he performed. Mr. Chapman is also a member of the WHS Jazz Band, and he recently performed "Rhapsody in Blue" with the Westfield Orchestra.

CAME, a non-profit organization formed in 1994, is a program of the Chinese American Cultural Association, which seeks to promote the ex-

change between Chinese and Western cultures. CAME consists of separate choruses for children, young people and adults, and it is the only chorus in the state to offer simultaneous choir music training for groups of all ages.

At "Art in the Gardens," Dr. Victor Shen conducted the Young People's Chorus and I-Chen Yang conducted the Children's Chorus. Both choruses performed multi-cultural and popular music selections.

"It was nice to see our professional artists and young talented performers give something back to the community. It brought the concert to the audience who may not have the chance to see this otherwise," said Christine Hobbie, CAME music director.

CAME is a recipient of Union County Arts Grants and HEART Grants.

The Shubanjali School of Performing Arts, Inc., which is also a HEART Grant recipient, is a non-profit organization promoting South Asian Arts. At "Art in the Gardens," Shubanjali students performed folk and classical dance from the country of India.

Suba Ramesh Parmar, an award-winning dancer and choreographer, founded Shubanjali School Ms. Parmar is also Shubanjali's artistic director.

"The traditional Indian art form that was performed at Jersey Gardens has survived thousands of years," explained Ms. Parmar.

"Art in the Gardens is an excellent opportunity for a Union County venue to host local talent and present it to a wide and diverse audience," said Freeholder Vice Chair Bette Jane Kowalski. "The Board of Chosen Freeholders is proud to have this annual event in Union County."

Jersey Gardens Mall opened in 1999, and currently houses 200 stores. Crystal Stell, marketing director for Jersey Gardens Mall, explains the mall's dedication to the arts.

"Our goal is to raise awareness of the arts in Union County and the many artists who deserve recognition for their achievements," she said. "We have been overwhelmed by the local talent right here in our own backyard."

For more information about other programs and services of the Division of Cultural and Heritage Affairs, contact the Division at 633 Pearl Street, Elizabeth, NJ 07202. They can be reached by phone at (908) 558-2550, or by e-mail at culturalinfo@ucnj.org.



EAST MEETS WEST... Westfield's Chinese American Music Ensemble (CAME) recently performed live at Jersey Gardens Mall in Elizabeth to mark National Art and Humanities Month.

TAKE THE STAGE

Broadway Performer Now Calls Westfield Home



By SUSAN M. DOUGHERTY

Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD - The next time you see an exceptionally attractive 30-something woman in downtown Westfield and think to yourself, "Boy, she could be on TV or on Broadway," maybe you're staring at Liz McConahay. She has performed in both venues.

In November, Ms. McConahay shared her talents on stage in Hackettstown by creating the role of Phyllis in the premiere production of *The Dew Point* by Neena Beber, who won the 2006 OBIE award for Emerging Playwright in NY last spring.

The actress, who has only lived in Westfield a little over two years, was excited about playing Phyllis for the Centenary Stage Company.

"There is plenty that's intriguing about Phyllis," she told *The Westfield Leader* and *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* in a phone interview. "She's a highly recognizable character in terms of what women in their mid-30's would see," Ms. McConahay explained.

One of the character's central struggles is finding a mate/relationship.

Although "She [Phyllis] really is a heightened eccentric type," Ms. McConahay said, there are parallels in the actress's personality to the character she played.

"She's pretty different than I am, but we both have a sense of humor in common."

Since "[playing] stock characters can be boring," she looks for a different view of the person.

No matter what part she plays, "I almost always look for comedy in tragedy and vice versa," she explained. Very often "irony surrounds

someone's tragedy, and that's the nugget of truth you look for in playing a character," she shared.

And she has played a wide range of characters in her acting career.

Ms. McConahay, who was classically trained at the Royal National Theater in England, where her instructors included Sir Peter Hall and

Sir Ian McKellan, played Estelle in Broadway's *The Full Monty*, Fraulein Kost in the Broadway revival of *Cabaret* and Alice Beane in the first National Tour of *Titanic*.

In addition to Broadway, Ms. McConahay's recent TV credits include "Unsolved Mysteries" and "Third Watch."

When she is not performing, she finds herself producing, directing and teaching.

"Being in such close proximity to Broadway," she said, "the area is rife with opportunities to help others and to expose new talents."

She teaches acting and voice privately, but gets most pleasure from being a part of the National Music Theater Network that encourages new work to be produced. "It's a challenge to connect the right folks to get their talent matched with the right venue nationwide."

"I think the reason that I'm a good teacher/producer/director," she said, "is because I came to NYC at age 25. I set goals—to star in musicals on Broadway—and met them. I know the struggle, the trajectory of ambition that most young folks experience."

"At 35, I'm continuing the journey of creativity. I know I have something in my heart that I have to contribute," she said. "Now I'm making the best use of my time in giving back to the [artistic] community."



Liz McConahay

Winter Drama Session Awaits Young Actors

WESTFIELD - After a successful initial fall season of the Creative Drama and Performance Workshop, director Donna Stein prepares for a new course, beginning January 9.

Many student and parent accolades accompanied the previous session's production. Parents expressed delight at the fact that each child was given individual attention and allowed to perform an essential role in the presentation of *King Harold is Gone*.

The story, created and written specifically with the cast members in mind, centered on King Harold about to celebrate his 50th birthday. When he and all the men of the kingdom disappeared, Queen Charlotte, her daughters and all the women of the kingdom had to solve the mysterious disappearance.

From January 9 to March 30, the dynamic Creative Drama and Performance Workshop will again give students, in grades 3, 4 and 5, the opportunity to explore the world of the theater. Held from 3:30 until 5 p.m. on Tuesdays at the First Baptist Church, located at 170 Elm Street in Westfield, the 13 sessions consist of exercises and activities intended to develop the child's ability in characterization.

Early classes will focus on movement, concentration, pantomime, improvisation, dialogue, character and story development. The children will learn to see, feel and think the character from the inside.

During the second half of the workshop, the attention will shift to the production as the children develop acting techniques. The participants will become aware of the importance of character consistency, dynamics between characters, dialogue interpretation, staging and physical pictures as they develop poise and confidence on the stage. The class will culminate in a performance for friends and family in March.

Miss Stein, who holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Southern Connecticut State University and a Master of Arts degree from Seton Hall

University. She taught various grade levels in the Westfield public school system and has been a staff member in the creative writing and drama departments at the Westfield Summer Workshop. For the past four years, she has judged New Jersey high school productions as an evaluator for the Paper Mill Playhouse's Rising Star Awards Program.

Registration is currently in progress for the Creative Drama and Performance Workshop. Applications forms are available at the New Jersey Workshop for The Arts (NJWA) studios at 150-152 East Broad Street in Westfield, or by calling (908) 789-9696. Visit the NJWA at njworkshopforthearts.com.

To receive a class brochure, for information concerning the WYACT summer production or to make a tax-exempt donation, call (908) 233-3200.

Ledger Names Ragtime Top 10 NJ Production

WESTFIELD - The Tuesday Star-Ledger named Westfield Young Artists' Cooperative Theatre's (WYACT) production of *Ragtime* to its top 10 New Jersey stage productions of 2006.

WYACT, under Artistic Director Cynthia Meryl, provides professional quality performing arts classes for ages 8 to 18 years. It will hold registration for its second semester classes on Monday, January 8, from 5 to 7 p.m. at WYACT's class location: 728 Westfield Avenue in Westfield (formerly Lincoln School, behind Kehler Stadium).

To receive a class brochure, for information concerning the WYACT summer production or to make a tax-exempt donation, call (908) 233-3200.

Choral Art Society Performs *Elijah*

WESTFIELD - The Choral Art Society of New Jersey, Inc., will perform Mendelssohn's *Elijah* on Saturday, January 20, at 8 p.m. at The Presbyterian Church in Westfield, located on Mountain Avenue at East Broad Street.

Considered by many critics Mendelssohn's greatest work, *Elijah* was written a few years before the composer's death in 1847 at the age of 38. Its first performance, with the composer himself conducting, was at the 1846 Birmingham Festival in England.

James Little, musical director of the society, will conduct the evening's performance. Mr. Little has been the director of the Choral Art Society of New Jersey since the spring of 1999. Soloists include Andi Campbell, soprano; Luthian Brackett, Alto; Mark Bleeke, tenor; and Dale Livingston, bass as Elijah.

The Choral Art Society Orchestra will accompany the chorus. Admission is \$20, \$15 for seniors and students, at the door. Tickets are available at boogie tickets.com.

For information, call (908) 654-5737.

Area Musicians Impress During Wardlaw Concert

AREA - At the Wardlaw-Hartridge (W-H) School in Edison on Thursday, December 14, guests enjoyed holiday musical performances by Upper School students, including several Westfield and Scotch Plains residents. Faculty, administrators and guests received the concert as the best Upper School concert experience in memory.

Violinist Sun Young Park of Scotch Plains amazed the audience with her performance of Camille Saint-Saens' "Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso." Instrumental music teacher and chairperson of the music department Jane Brown accompanied her.

Next, the Upper School Chorus, led by music teacher Jennifer Randolph, performed "Erev Shel Shoshanim" and "In Excelsis Deo!" with Sun Young playing piano. Mrs. Brown also accompanied Sun Young during a jazz performance of "Trio for Piano, Violin, and Alto Saxophone" with Edison resident Daniel Treppel.

The W-H Choral Arts Society, which is directed by Matthew Forman of Scotch Plains, performed "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," as well as "We Three Kings." Mrs.

Brown accompanied the ensemble. Next, Sun Young on piano and flutist Mi Reu Park offered a duet of Griffes' "Poem for Flute and Piano."

Finally, the Upper School Concert Choir, led by Middle School/Upper School Chorus teacher Jennifer Randolph performed "Sure on This Shining Night" with Sun Young playing piano, "Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy," "O Magnum Mysterium" and "Angels We Have Heard on High."

Members of the audience were invited to join the concert choir in the "Hallelujah Chorus." Alums including Frank Miniti of Scotch Plains and Kyle English gathered on the risers with guests such as Head of School Andrew Webster, College Counselor Lisa Lentz, current parent Vicki Isler, several members of the Board of Trustees, as well as Lower School Head, Regina Bassoul-Restivo and French teacher, Gayle Fredericks.

Other local performers include: Westfield residents Raphael Eidus, Alice Ren and Justin Schwartz, and Scotch Plains residents Mark Badalamenti, Michael Mietlicki, Reid Miller, Alyssa Torpey.



STUNNING SOLO...Sun Young Park of Scotch Plains impressed the audience with her violin solo, which received a standing ovation.

Pearl Street Gallery Will Present An Exhibit by SP Photographer



Hodges' Chinook Arctic Wolf

SCOTCH PLAINS - The Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders will present an exhibit by photographer George Hodges of Scotch Plains in the gallery space at the Union County Office of Cultural and Heritage Affairs, located at 633 Pearl Street in Elizabeth.

An exhibit of Mr. Hodges' photographs titled "Instances of Light" is on display at the historic Pearl Street Gallery through February 1. Gallery hours are 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays. "After a lifetime in the corporate world, I have spent the last five years

worked in the telecommunications industry for 30 years. He has resided in Scotch Plains for 25 years.

He has recently shot the cover photo for "Return of the Wolf," the Wildlife Conservation Society Wild Explorations Student Guide.

Union County artists (whose works can be hung on a wall) interested in exhibiting in the gallery are welcome to apply. For more information about the Pearl Street Gallery or to learn about other programs, services and volunteer opportunities, contact the Union County Office of Cultural and Heritage Affairs, located at 633 Pearl Street, Elizabeth, NJ 07202. Interested parties are asked to call (908) 558-2550. NJ Relay users can dial 711 or send e-mail to: culturalinfo@ucnj.org.

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One Popcorn, Poor • Two Popcorns, Fair • Three Popcorns, Good • Four Popcorns, Excellent
By MICHAEL S. GOLDBERGER
3 popcorns

In *The Pursuit of Happiness*, starring Will Smith as a father struggling against all odds to make a future for himself and his son (Jaden Smith), there are few surprises. That's because you either know the true story, written for the screen by Steve Conrad, or simply because you've seen a movie or two in your time.

Interestingly, you don't mind. There's an inherent tradeoff. Just this go-round, of course, you'll skip the avant-garde cineaste stuff in favor of old-fashioned, feel good fare. An empathic lead and the tacit promise of a rainbow at journey's end see to that.

What's rather impressive is how, with all these cats out of the bag, director Gabriele Muccino still manages to maintain a modicum of suspense. At junctures, he makes you wonder. Perhaps he'll change the tale, pull a fast one in the pursuit of artistic expression.

We think, he better not. This poor guy Chris Gardner needs a break. And we'd like the vicarious experience.

It fits our character...the Horatio Alger of it all. If hardworking, persevering Chris doesn't deserve to pull himself out of the muck and mire of poor circumstances and bad luck, who then? Worse yet, wither goest the American Dream?

Though, he sure is up against it. When first we make the thirty-something's acquaintance, he's running all around the San Francisco Bay Area trying to sell an apartment full of bone density scanners to physicians. They were to be his future.

Seriously reminiscent of how Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden (*The Honeymooners*) would put himself into hock for an albeit more outlandish stock of get rich quick gizmos and gadgets, the going is rough. Making it worse, wife Linda (Thandie Newton) exhibits neither the love nor succor that Alice so charitably possessed.

The machines go largely unsold, the rent goes several months unpaid. Then, adding insult to injury in Linda's eyes, Chris hatches another plan.

It comes to him whilst a well-dressed executive parks his red Ferrari 308 GTS in front of an office building. He asks the fellow what he does. "I'm a stockbroker."

After no small amount of inveigling, wheedling and jockeying, Chris gets into the vaunted internship program at Dean Witter and Reynolds. Meaning no pay. No promise of a job, either.

Chris might as well have informed the wife that he had just purchased some magic beans. The laundress,

who has been pulling double shifts, washes the man right out of her hair. Our would-be tycoon insists that the boy stays with him.

One parent, one child...pals against the world. There's a built in appeal. Bleak as things may get, there is a sadly hopeful solace in the lasting relationship that can be sown.

Our heartstrings are expertly strummed. Having been tossed out of their cheap motel room, Chris and his little namesake, played, incidentally, by Smith's real-life son, take up residence in a subway station bathroom.

Optimizing a running gag that threads through the tale, Mr. Gardner manufactures a hearth and home of the mind by pretending the bone density scanner is a time machine. Together, always the key word, they are transported to prehistoric times. There's nothing like running from woolly mammoths to make you bond.

Meanwhile, in the daytime, somehow managing to scrub the trappings of poverty from his person, Chris mounts a courageous campaign to succeed at Dean Witter. Hope dangles. At the end of the tunnel, there'll be an opening for just one broker. Gosh knows, no one ever wanted it more.

Here's where director Muccino errs. Granted, there's no real way to offset the script's 800-pound gorilla of predictability. Still, a bit more confidence would have been in order. The ceaseless array of stumbling blocks tossed in Chris's path only gilds the lily.

I.e. - Rushing off in an attempt to see a potentially important account deigning to allot only a precious few minutes of his time, Chris is snagged by his instructor. This time it isn't to get a cup of coffee. Instead, would he please move his car? Groan.

We get the idea, but surely there must have been an interesting side-light to Gardner's travail. Was there no love interest? A fictionalized counterpart would be permissible. The right subtext might have not only softened the film's inevitability, but given it a more robust feel.

All the same, this is a heartwarming time at the movies. Which, in summation, prompts a variation on Bette Davis's closing line in *Now, Voyager* (1942): Let's don't ask for a perfect movie. We have the *Pursuit of Happiness*.

The Pursuit of Happiness, rated PG-13, is a Columbia Pictures release directed by Gabriele Muccino and stars Will Smith, Thandie Newton and Jaden Smith. Running time: 117 minutes



HOLIDAY SPIRIT...Members of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School (SPFHS) select chorus entertained a packed house at the Manya Ungar Auditorium on December 20 with beautiful songs of the holiday season. There are more than 200 students involved in five ensembles at the high school, all of them led by choral director John Brzozowski, who is an SPFHS alum. The next musical event at SPFHS is the Pops Concert at 7:30 p.m. on January 31, 2007, featuring the music of the Moonglowers, SPF Jazz, the High School Orchestra and more.



CATCH IT WHILE YOU CAN...Contagious Drama Workshop's Creative Dramatics class, inspired by a story read in class, put on a play concerning homelessness.

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