

Cape May Stage acts as savior, caretaker of 1853 former church, now playhouse

By **BOB DREYFUSS**
For Cape May Stage

CAPE MAY — One hundred sixty-two years ago, at the corner of Lafayette and Bank streets, a local carpenter and builder named Peter Hand began with hammer and nail, brick and mortar, to erect the framework of what is now the Robert Shackleton Playhouse, home of Cape May Stage.

It was 1853, and Hand — who was a member of a prominent family whose forebears had settled in the Cape May area more than three centuries ago — took just six months, and about \$7,000, to complete the construction of the Cape Island Presbyterian Church. Since then, the stately building — preserved in almost its original appearance — has been home to Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians, served as a community meeting house and as a welcome center for the city of Cape May, and since 1994 has been the venue for scores of theatrical productions. But Cape May is fortunate that the building still stands, since back in the 1950s it was slated to be bulldozed and turned into a parking lot.

Like the building itself, the Hand family embodies a central piece of local history. The family traces its origins back to the Mayflower, to the 17th-century whalers who plied the Atlantic coast and to the hardy families who arrived in Cape May as early as the 1690s. Back then, three sons of John Hand built a number of the Cape May area's oldest edifices, and in 1703, Jeremiah Hand laid out the town of Romney Marsh, currently Cape May Court House. Several generations later, Peter Hand took it upon himself to assemble the church that stands today, designing it in eclectic fashion, drawing on a range of architectural styles and settling on what has been called "Georgian-vernacular." If he had a set of original plans, no one has uncovered them, and according to Dave Clemans — who has played an instrumental role in restoring and preserving the structure — it's possible that Hand proceeded on a combination of instinct and a mental picture of what he intended to create.

"It may be that Peter Hand just put it up," Clemans said. Topped by its iconic belvedere, an onion-shaped, almost mosque-like cupola — whose form, today, is mimicked by the recently installed ticket booth that graces the courtyard — the playhouse is a Cape May architectural gem.

Walking around it, you can't help but notice the intersecting designs that mark the structure. According to a description by the New Jersey state Historic Preservation Office, the converted church begins with a Greek Revival/Italianate centerpiece with a Saracenic Revival belfry up above, a detail that may have been added in the 1860s after



Jack Fichter/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE
The Robert Shackleton Theater was built in 1853 as a church. It later was designated for destruction to make way for a parking lot but now is the home of Cape May Stage.

the Civil War, when Middle Eastern influences came into vogue.

Its historic clapboard and shutters, painted an elegant, contrasting gray and red, were part of the original design, as were the tall, stately windows on the north and south sides of the building. Entering the playhouse, the theatergoer passes through a tall, red-painted double-arch front door, capped by a classic, round arch window.

Since 2005, it's been listed on the National Register of Historic Places — but over the past decade or so it's taken lots of hard work to preserve, protect, restore and rebuild this century-and-a-half-old treasure. Battered and bruised by a succession of owners — some of whom may have lacked the resources, the energy and the time to maintain it, not to mention the respect and loving care owed to such a historic building — by the 1990s it had fallen into desperate disrepair.

"It was almost derelict," Clemans said. When Cape May Stage first occupied it in 1994, he said, the roof leaked whenever it rained, and water would pour in. From time to time, dust, debris and falling acoustic tiles in the ceiling would tumble down onto the folding chairs or the bare old wooden floor. The walls were cracked, the entire building was settling and the 20-foot-tall belvedere was leaning at a precarious angle.

Formed in the late 1980s, Cape May Stage — envisioned from the start as a professional, Actors Equity Association theater — got its start putting on productions in the Grassy Sound home of its founder, the late Michael Laird, before moving to larger venues in the Chalfonte Hotel, Cold Spring Village and Congress Hall. But it needed a permanent home.

Since 1952, when the church's owners sold it to the

city for \$2,000, the city began making plans to demolish it and replace it with a parking lot. Fortunately, Tom Harris, an early Cape May preservationist, convinced the town not to do so, and instead it became the Historical and Community Center of Cape May, hosting a wide variety of events from art shows and dances to banquets and association meetings. Later on, and still in need of major renovations, the creaky but venerable building had served the city as a welcome center for tourists visiting the resort.

In 1993, Laird convinced the city to allow Cape May Stage to rent the welcome center for evening performances, and in that year the "Dorothy Parker Story" became the first play put on in its current home. The following year, the city leased it to Cape May Stage — which, in turn, took on the challenge of turning a threatened structure into a solid, attractive and comfortable venue for actors and audiences alike.

It wasn't easy. A decade or so ago, a team of dedicated volunteers, including people with experience in historic preservation, got together to plan for the renaissance of Cape May Stage's new home. Led by Clemans, of Sea Grove Associates, a contractor with long experience in the care and feeding of old buildings, the team — including Jim Moffatt, Tom Carroll, Connie Felicetti and Joe Panullo — hired an architect, Michael Calafati, and began to tackle it from the ground up — or, actually, from the top down, starting with righting the tilt of the crowning belvedere.

Moffatt chaired what became known as Project Encore, aimed at nothing less than transforming the space and giving it new life. Nearly \$1.5 million was raised almost entirely from individual donors in the Cape May community.

"Being a former church, we called it the resurrection," Clemans said.

A great deal of the work, by builders, carpenters, masons, electricians and others, was donated free or at cost.

It was a daunting task. To preserve and, in some cases, rebuild it according to its original appearance, and in trying to maintain fidelity to its original design, the team assembled old photographs of the church from the 19th century, especially for exterior detail such as the new gingerbread railings that were added or restored.

Over the next several years, they added a new roof and shingles, reinforced the support beams beneath the roof, repaired the ceiling — taking great care not to alter the excellent acoustics of the original structure — repaired the window sashes and shutters, and added a few coats of paint.

Inside, a major effort was expended to repair and replace the heavy columns and beams supporting the mezzanine choir, along with strengthening the main floor itself to support a planned new seating gallery and lots of traffic. Besides the structural reinforcement for the mezzanine, the team added an electronic control booth for sound and light technicians. And they installed a state-of-the-art heating and air conditioning system, too.

They weren't done. To upgrade the theater, they renovated the entire lobby, adding an inside ticket desk and reception area, and installed a set of spacious, comfortable bathrooms in marble and granite. The floor, which was cracked linoleum, was painstakingly replaced with rich-looking oak floorboards. And, for the actors, the back of the former church was built out and expanded, adding dressing rooms and other facilities. Finally, in 2008, Cape May Stage replaced its characteristic tiered seating, with two sections built around a wide center aisle. Later, outside, they added the charming piazza, terrace and fountain, and finally the belfry-like kiosk.

Currently, a new effort is under way to provide continued restoration and upgrades, including replacing all eight 24-pane windows that are one of the defining features of the edifice and repainting the exterior.

"It was built in 1853 by Peter Hand for \$7,000, which is astonishing, given that we're now paying \$8,500 for each window," Clemans said.

Today, Hand's handiwork still stands, and proudly, as a centerpiece of the community in Cape May and a jewel in the city's Victorian heritage. In many ways, it is still a community center, used for community events and weddings, magic shows and performances for children, and, of course, a series of world-class theatrical productions every season.



Jack Fichter/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE
City Clerk Louise Cummiskey swears in Shaine Meier, who was joined by his mother, Helen, left, and his brother, Christian.

New City Council members speak of new direction, era

By **JACK FICHTER**
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — City Council saw a changing of the guard when three new members received their oaths of office on New Year's Day.

Jerry Inderwies Jr. received his oath of office from City Clerk Louise Cummiskey surrounded by his family. In his remarks after receiving his oath, Inderwies said 2015 began his 30th year of service to the city.

"I can truly say I loved every minute of it," he said.

Inderwies thanked his family for their support and his campaign committee of Jim Cheney, Robert Steenrod and Heather Bruno.

He said his vision was to keep Cape May "safe, secure, prosperous and always improving."

"I am proud to say my father was elected to City Council in 1972 to provide a change in direction of the city and its government," Inderwies said. "He accomplished that goal."

"I believe today starts a new beginning and a change in direction. I intend on accomplishing my goal," he continued.

With fresh ideas, positive attitudes and teamwork, Cape May can be even better, Inderwies said.

Bea Pessagno, the daughter of former Mayor Frank Gauvry, received her oath of office from Superior Court Judge Raymond Batten accompanied by her daughter and sister. In her remarks, Pessagno said she recalled sitting in the balcony of City Hall Auditorium 50 years ago for the first time. She said her father was trying to convince the citizens of Cape May that the Washington Street Mall was a good idea.

"As I observed the proceedings from above, I had no idea

that I was really a witness to something much bigger than the beginning of the new mall," Pessagno said. "But rather it was the beginning of what has been a massive and collaborative effort which is called the revitalization and preservation of the city of Cape May."

She said for more than five decades, the growth of the community has been phenomenal. Individuals from every walk of life have invested their time, treasure and talent to bring the city from the brink of obscurity to thriving resort it is today.

Pessagno said there was still much work to be done and council was charged with extending the work and vision of those who had gone before in order to benefit those who will come after.

"We have to ensure that future generations have all the same quality of life and opportunities that we have now," she said.

Pessagno said it was an exciting time for Cape May.

"Today, this room and this community are as charged with energy and potential as they were 50 years ago," she said. "Once again we are on the cusp of a new era. Therefore, we must seize this moment, act judiciously but with vision and with courage as we move our city further into this century."

Shaine Meier received his oath from Cummiskey surrounded by his mother and brothers. He said he would do his very best to represent the will of the people. Meier dedicated the honor of serving on council to his mother, Helen. He said his mother moved him and his brothers to Cape May because she knew it was a safe place to raise a family.

Meier said his mother got him involved in scouting, baseball, choir practice and 4-H Club.

"My mother is the toughest person I know and if it wasn't for her getting me involved at a young age, I wouldn't be here today," he said.

By a vote of council, Councilwoman Terri Swain was elected deputy mayor. She received her oath of office from Batten.

Cape May Star and Wave
CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE (ISSN 519-020)
Volume 160 Number 54
Published weekly by Sample Media, Inc., 801 Asbury Ave., #310, Ocean City, N.J. 08226
Published Weekly (52 times a year)
SUBSCRIPTION PRICE: By mail for \$39 a year; \$70 for two years; \$20 for six months. Periodical Postage at Pleasantville, N.J. and additional mailing offices.
POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to the Cape May Star and Wave, 600 Park Blvd. #28, West Cape May, N.J. 08204.
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8	9:44	10:16	3:17	4:04
9	10:21	10:57	3:57	4:40
10	10:59	11:40	4:38	5:17
11	11:39		5:23	5:56
12	12:26	12:24	6:14	6:39
13	1:18	1:15	7:11	7:26
14	2:13	2:14	8:13	8:19

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Unbroken PG-13 12:10, 3:20, 7:05, 10:00
The Hobbit: Battle of the Five Armies PG-13 12:00, 3:10, 6:50, 9:50
Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb PG 11:20, 2:00, 4:20, 6:40, 9:10
Annie PG 11:10, 1:50, 4:30
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