

Long Beach Gets An Encore

Performing Arts Center Revives Downtown Entertainment Scene

■ By **THYDA DUONG**
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For a number of years, the Long Beach Civic Light Opera (CLO) produced shows at the Long Beach Performing Arts Center's Terrace Theater – until it went bankrupt in the mid-1990s. The outcome caught many in the city and the arts community off guard, and as a result, the theater was left with more open dates than it could fill.

“[It] was a wonderful organization, but it unfortunately met some hard times,” says David Gordon, general manager of the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center. “There was a negative taste in some of the local people’s mouths because of the CLO going under. There was some hesitancy to come back here to see those types of events. . . . It took us quite some time to get that trust back, to show them that we were serious about putting on first-class events here.”

Since that time, however, the likes of Jerry Seinfeld and the late George Carlin have made appearances at the center, which also boasts past performances by Melissa Etheridge and Brian Wilson. A score of Broadway musicals, such as “Mamma Mia!,” “Cats” and “42nd Street,” have also taken the stage, as have children’s shows such as “Sesame Street Live” and “Blues Clues Live.”

In addition to the Long Beach Arena and exhibition halls, a ballroom and meeting rooms, the convention center facilities include the Terrace and Center theaters, which constitute the Performing Arts Center. In total, the convention center hosts more than 800 event days, of which the theaters are a large part.



Dan Spellens, left, director of theaters & entertainment, describes the Long Beach Performing Arts Center as a “current, viable, exciting [and] busy performance space.” He is joined by David Gordon, general manager of the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center. (Photograph by the Business Journal’s Thomas McConville)

Gordon attributes a large part of the performing arts center’s success to Dan Spellens, who joined the team in 1999 as director of theaters & entertainment. As a result of Spellens’ background in artist representation and concert promotion, the center was able to make connections with – and offer audiences – a wide range of entertainment options, from concerts and musical acts to children’s shows and ethnic and cultural events.

“At first it was very difficult because . . . there was a whole group of young agents and young managers and young artists who really didn’t know about Long Beach,” Spellens says. “It took a concentrated effort of re-education and getting people down here. . . . It took us maybe a year or two to kick-start things, but by the time we hit 2002 and 2003, we were doing much, much better than we had previously.”

The center’s vision, Spellens says, is to continue to provide a wide range of entertainment opportunities and cultural



From Broadway musicals to children's shows, Dan Spellens, left, director of theaters & entertainment, and David Gordon, general manager of the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center, highlight the Performing Arts Center's goal to cater to diverse audiences. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

events for the City of Long Beach, its different ethnic communities and Southern California in general. "I don't think I'm resorting to hyperbole when I say we really do service a very, very wide range of potential audience that's out there," he says.

Its challenges, however, are very easily defined as the Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts, the Orange County Performing Arts Center, the Kodak Theatre, the Nokia Theatre, the Greek Theater and the Hollywood Bowl, Spellens notes.

"There's not much we can do about those. We need to coexist with them, and we believe we can," he says. "We're not looking to get everything that's out there and available as an entertainment option; we just want our share. We've been doing a good job of getting that, and that's what we'd like to continue to do."

And the new high-rise developments, which are changing the Long Beach skyline and attracting new downtown residents, are also home to potential audience members, Gordon says. "We're starting to see new faces at events. We're trying to provide entertainment for Downtown Long Beach because now, more so than ever, there's a nighttime crowd," he observes. "So we think that's also

going to increase our attendance and people wanting to come to the theaters."

The changing arts climate in Long Beach is increasingly positive, says Gordon, who has been at the convention center for 20 years. He recalls a time when both the Long Beach Symphony and the Long Beach Opera were on the verge of bankruptcy. Both, however, have come back strong and perform regularly at the center.

Spellens agrees, saying: "I think that the tenor of the arts in town is good and on the upswing. And I also believe that arts begets arts. So the more that goes on – whether we're doing it or the playhouse is doing it or the Carpenter Center is doing it – . . . I think it bodes well for the city. And we certainly encourage all purveyors of the arts in town to continue and grow their programs, as we plan to – and I think have proven that we can, and will do."

The Long Beach Performing Arts Center is located at 300 E. Ocean Blvd. Upcoming shows scheduled for the remainder of the year include Clean Comedy Jam, Playhouse Disney 2008, An Evening With David Sedaris and Broadway musical "Sweeney Todd." For more information, call 562/436-3636 or visit www.long-beachcc.com. ■