

FOCUS: CONSTRUCTION, DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE

Theatre By The Sea redesigns walkway

By Richard Asinof
PBN Contributing Writer

Work on a new brick walkway in the gazebo garden at Theatre By The Sea, the nonprofit summer theater company run by the Ocean State Theatre Co. Inc., in South Kingstown, marks the property's first significant improvement in 20 years.

Don Leighton, a principal with the landscape architectural firm, Gates, Leighton & Associates Inc., based in East Providence, recently began laying out the \$25,000 project with the general contractor, Rare Earth Landscaping Inc. of Charlestown. The job is expected to take about a month to complete, Leighton said.

The redesign of the theater's entrance walk is a project that Leighton puts into the "fun" category. Much of his firm's actual time on the job is donated; it's the kind of job, he says, that reflects his firm's willingness to work with nonprofit community groups. "This is something we've always done, throughout our entire career," said Leighton, who recently moved from Barrington to Narragansett, and is now a neighbor of the theater. With this project, he continued, "we have been offering our time to see it through, to make it come out the way we envision it."

The project, though small in size, encompassing about 750 square feet, is a very big step for the theater, according to Tom Senter, the business manager of the Ocean State Theatre Co.

The 75-year-old property, a barn structure located at the site of a former girls' camp, is in need of constant care and attention, Senter says. More than a quarter of the company's operating budget goes towards keeping the doors open and operating the building.

The garden and the walkway are a major component of "what makes this site one of Rhode Island's most beloved historical treasures," explained Amiee Turner, president of the board of directors at Ocean State Theatre Co. There is a commitment, she said, to preserving "the legacy of this extraordinary theater," as well as producing Broadway-quality shows at affordable prices in South County.

In addition to the walkway, improvements will also be made to drainage in the area and to connect the handicapped-accessible ramp between the parking lot, the theater and restrooms. The project will also remove any potential tripping hazards caused by current edging materials. A conduit for night lighting will also be installed under the walkway, to accommodate wiring if and when a new lightscape is designed and installed for the outdoor garden. A May 1 ribbon-cutting is planned.

From a design standpoint, those involved with the theater have brought a creative spirit to the project, Leighton said. "We collectively have crafted a walkway plan that ensures the proper fit with the surround landscape, enhancing the experience of theatergoers as they linger in



IMAGE COURTESY THEATRE BY THE SEA

WALK TO REMEMBER: The \$25,000 walkway improvement at the Theatre By The Sea in South Kingstown is expected to take about a month to complete.

the garden before or after a show.”

Leighton says he will continue to work closely with the project through its completion. “There are some things [which we know] we haven’t yet discovered,” he said, expecting that when the contractor looks at the subsoil conditions, there may be other drainage issues. “We’re there to work the solutions ... and to ensure that we’re still within the budget.”

The bricks used in the walkway will also serve as a fundraising opportunity for the theater company. For \$250, patrons can engrave a four-inch by eight-inch brick with either a name or message; for \$500, patrons can engrave an eight-inch by eight-inch brick known as a paver.

“There are roughly 350 bricks available for engraving,” Senter said. “No specific goal has been set, but we hope to raise as much as \$100,000.”

The gazebo garden is a place of special memories for so many people, says Karen Gail Kessler, who has handled publicity for the theater company since 2007. That’s when the theater, which had offered shows on and off since 1933, reopened under the current management team. “So far, people are commemorating the birth of a child, weddings, engagements or just using their names,” she said.

After extensive research, the brick being used is a clay brick product made in Missouri, purchased from a local distributor in Westerly, and it will be integrated with a stone element of New England origin, according to Kessler.

The integration of the construction project with the landscape design will be coordinated by Dana Designs, the steward of the gardens at Theatre By The Sea. The Richmond-based business is run by Dana Millar, who described his company’s services as “organic maintenance of landscape property,” with a focus on preserving Rhode Island’s coastline by helping landowners in the way they manage their property.

His goal with the theater project, Millar said, is to “recapture the gardens from the past, making it more presentable.” When he spoke with Providence Business News, he had just finished a day’s work at the theater, pruning and trimming and shearing plants to make them look great in June and July.

As for the overall grounds, Millar described his task as much like that of tending to an athletic field, “because so many people use it, walking on the lawn.”

One of the best parts of this project, he said, is the ability to collaborate with Leighton. “Working with Don [Leighton] is a treat for me,” Millar said. •