

## The Gateway Theatre: A Work in Progress

“Curtain up, light the lights, there is nothing to fear but the heights.” Stephen Sondheim’s lyrics best describe our hopes for the future of the Gateway Theatre. Live theatre once again will come to Somers Point. It is a significant part of our local heritage dating back to 1952 when producer Jonathan Dwight turned the original Gateway Casino into a summer playhouse. Before that, the Gateway Casino was an entertainment mecca and known for presenting such performers as Louis Armstrong, Gene Krupp, Louis Prima, Frankie Lane, and Red Skeleton, to name a few. By 1953, the Gateway was the largest summer theatre in the country. Musicals such as *Brigadoon*, *Showboat*, *Kiss Me Kate*, and *Bloomer Girl* were presented. Stars such as Sidney Blackmer, Margaret Hamilton and John Barrymore, Jr. appeared as well as newcomers such as Brock Peters who were learning their craft.

After losing its lease, the Gateway Theatre moved its operations to the old Seaside Theatre at the present location on Bay and Higbee Avenues. The building had been a movie theatre since the days of the silent in the 1920’s, originally a warehouse built around 1910. Now it was to be a live theatre. The CinemaScope screen was removed and the stage was expanded to accommodate the musical productions. Again well known stars such as Edward Everett Horton, Constance Bennett, Veronica Lake, Stu Erwin, and Bess Meyers appeared onstage. In the off season, sub run movies would be shown. This operation folded in 1964. The Shriver Theatre Company of Ocean City then leased and renovated the building in 1965. It reopened as a movie theatre in July with a musical, MGM’s *Unsinkable Molly Brown* starring Debbie Reynolds. This arrangement ended in 1976.

Next, producer Paul Aiken took over the building and through the South Jersey Regional Theatre brought back live theatre. Again the venue included musicals as well as smaller productions. It also became a year round operation and employed all actors as well as members of Actors Equity Guild. There were plans in the early nineties to construct a new building across the street, but this never came to fruition.

Bill Marshall took over next using local theatrical groups. During this period productions became more and more intermittent and the building was showing its age.

The building was purchased by the City of Somers Point in 2006. Subsequently, the Theatre Collaborative of South Jersey was established with the goal of refurbishing the building and bringing back live theatre. With the help of grants from Pepsi and Shore Medical Center, the building is now undergoing an extreme makeover. Hopefully with the help of many volunteer and contributions “Everything will be coming up roses.”