

# Bonnie Comley and Stewart Lane: MAKING THE GREAT WHITE WAY A LITTLE BRIGHTER

“Sometimes I feel guilty that we throw most of our support towards the arts and not medical research,” says Broadway Producer Bonnie Comley, who with her husband, Stewart Lane, are driving forces on the Great White Way. “We buy tickets for those events. But, when it comes to education and the arts, we buy tables. That’s because, I believe society defines itself through its art. Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Beethoven, Cezanne, that’s what lives on. Our culture makes us great.”

“I wish I could take care of everybody,” Bonnie once told me in an unguarded moment. No one can do that. But the Lanes’ behind-the-scenes generosity is almost as legendary as the plays they produce.

Right now, those plays include “Superior Donuts,” Tracy Letts’ follow-up to “August Osage County,” “The Thirty-Nine Steps,” the longest-running comedy on Broadway (about to go regional) and the tour of their Broadway hit, “Legally Blonde.” Lane also owns the Palace Theatre, where “West Side Story” thrives, and “Liza at the Palace” sold out last year. Stewart’s been doing this for a long time. “La Cage Aux Folles,” “Gypsy” (with Bernandette Peters), “The Will Rogers Follies,” the recent revivals of “Sunday in the Park with George,” “Fiddler on the Roof” and “Cyrano” are some of his past hits.

He just released a DVD version of his how-to book, “Let’s Put on a Show, From Raising Money to Creating an Audience.” (Get it on Mrbroadway.com or workingartsvideo.com.) The Drama League – who honored the Lanes at their prestigious spring benefit -- hosted a lecture and DVD signing at the Palace with “Stew.” The book – and DVD – is a must have for anyone hoping to avoid the common pitfalls and orchestrate a successful show, from a professional, university or high school theatre production to a charity event. “The DVD gave me a chance to go back on camera,” said Stewart, who started out as an actor, and won awards for “Curtain Time,” a cable talk show he hosted and produced with Bonnie, years ago. “If they like what they see, they can get more information from the book.”

That event kicked off what seemed like a mini season of Lane charitable events. There were three in one week: an exclusive cocktail party in their home, with David Hyde Pierce, for the Actors Fund; a huge gala, “Broadway Salutes Arts Horizons Honoring Stewart F. Lane & Bonnie Comley, John Devol,” at the Edison Ballroom; and a private luncheon with designers Tory Burch and Stan Herman, and Town & Country Editor Pamela Fiori, at Bergdorfs, to benefit Guild Hall in the Hamptons. “Superior Donuts” had just had its opening night.

Two weeks later, Bonnie would host a shopping party at Tory’s NoLita store to benefit a Lanes’ pet charity, The Theatre Museum. Stew, as Chairman of the Board and Bonnie, as an Advisory Committee member, have been instrumental in funding a permanent home for the museum, which should be completed at the Five Towns College Campus, within two years. “We loved the idea,” Comley says, “because it’s the first of its kind. It’s about preserving and promoting all things theatre. Otherwise, once you miss the performance, it’s gone. Hopefully, building awareness helps build audience.”

Speaking of which, Lane is watching this season very closely. “I’ve held my breath for a year now watching the economy,” he says. “Statistically, the theatre has higher income and educated audiences. So far, our ticket buyers have been able to avoid the recession. But, as these law firms tighten as well as Wall Street, I’m concerned about good shows falling by the wayside. The juggernauts are still working well, ‘Billy Elliot,’ ‘West Side Story,’ ‘The Lion King.’ But, only three new musicals are coming in, because capital is tight. This might open the door to Off Broadway and cheaper seats.”

In the meantime, the Lanes will keep stewarding their causes, giving underprivileged youth access to arts education (Arts Horizons), taking care of the majority of actors, dancers and other performers who give so much to their audiences but don’t get the security of hitting it big (Actors Fund), local theatres like Guild Hall, and preserving the memory of the beautiful theatrical experience that they so love. – **Lee Fryd**



CBS Newscaster Lauren Glassberg



Stewart Lane, Michael McKeon, Bonnie Comley



Tory Burch and Town & Country editor Pamela Fiori



David Hyde Pierce