

The Jasper Street Miracle at the South Camden Theatre

Many stories are worth retelling. The story of the South Camden Theatre is especially worthy. The theatre began as the extraordinary dream of a virtually unknown playwright and aspiring director Joseph Paprzycki. Some six years ago, in a request for financial support, Helene Pierson, Executive Director of Heart of Camden, memorably summarized the beginning:



Playwright/director Joseph Paprzycki, is seeing his dream come true at the South Camden Theatre.

"A few years ago, I was stopped outside of mass by a man named Joe Paprzycki. Said he wanted to build a theatre, said Father Doyle said he should talk to Heart of Camden. I am here on this earth because my S. 6th Street Waterfront South grandmother took the Ferry to Philadelphia to watch a play in which my grandfather was one of the main characters. His name was Joe. So, of course, working on a theatre in

Waterfront South with this man named Joe was my Destiny. Most of you know Joe's story by now. Turns out, he too, had Waterfront South grandparents. They owned a corner bar. He wrote a play about it. The bar needed to become a theatre. It was Joe's destiny."

My own skepticism limits my faith in destiny, but I have no doubts about the power of committed dreamers. Joe Paprzycki, Father Doyle of Sacred Heart parish, Helene Pierson and the other members of the Heart of Camden, dreamers all, led the way.

They convinced the Scanlon Foundation to purchase the three boarded up houses on the site of the proposed new theatre. As plans quickly began to develop, the Heart of Camden convinced, Pepe Piperno, another dreamer, and his Domenica Foundation to fund a large portion of the theatre construction. Other Dreamers followed. Dozens contributed the hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars required to make the dream a reality. Together they surmounted obstacles and succeeded. Go to the corner of 4th and Jasper in South Camden and see what dreams are made of.

From the moment I first heard of the dream and the plan, I was full of surprise, hope, and deep doubt. Like most of Camden, the area around Sacred Heart is severely blighted. Thanks to Heart of Camden, on the streets immediately next to the church itself, most of the houses have been renovated or rebuilt. But just a couple of blocks away, the blight remains. No matter. To Helene Pierson and the other supporters of the theatre, "the greater the challenge, the stronger the effort." As she wrote in the letter quoted above,

"Out of the project, a sort of neighborhood battle cry for revitalization became our mantra, or if you know us well, it is more of a neighborhood cry for peace—Art will Save Us!"

What a cry! What a dream! As someone who has devoted much of his life to reading, studying, writing and talking about plays, poems, and novels, I was immediately lured, almost bewitched. It may seem madness, but what attractive madness: "Art will save us!"

I was reminded of an excellent play I saw several years before by British playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker titled *Our Country's Good*. It is a many-layered, multi-problem work, but its main story line is that convicts in a penal colony can be redeemed, made more compassionate, and beneficent by staging and acting in a play. The main assertion seems to be that asking or cajoling convicts in a prison colony to produce a play is not a frivolous activity but an important redemptive activity, something that vitally contributes to individual remediation and our country's good! How about that, "Art will save us!" and in Camden!

Not surprisingly, the plans for organizing actors and producing plays moved more rapidly than the building of the new theatre. Therefore, the South Camden Theatre Company began by staging its first productions in the cafeteria in the basement of Sacred Heart. I saw my first productions of the company there. They included Joe's own *Last Rites* and a series of one acts called *Facing Each Other* with local actors, and even neighbors in the leading roles.

Once the splendid new theatre opened, the number of plays increased, the quality of the productions became much more refined and clearly professional, and the surprisingly good acting became even better. A whole season was devoted to the plays of Tennessee



Now home to the South Camden Theatre, this once-corner bar in the Waterfront South area of Camden has been transformed into a thriving professional theatre with critical acclaim.

—Photo by Ed Wolfe

Williams, which included the best production of *Suddenly Last Summer* that I have ever seen.

Since it opened in 2010, more than 15,000 have attended, and several of the performances have won critical acclaim from local reviewers Howard Shapiro, Jack Shaw, and Wendy Rosenfield.

The coming season will include Tennessee Williams' *Kingdom of Earth*, Joseph Paprzycki's *Express Tracks*, and *Geremini* by Philadelphia native, Albert Innaurato.

If you are at all taken by the story of Joe Paprzycki's dream, I suggest you to buy a ticket, or a season pass, and go see the Jasper Street miracle. With each season and each performance, I find the productions to get better and better. And each time I go I wonder more and more if art can, indeed, save us and how we measure "our country's good," especially in Camden. You can contact the Waterfront South Theatre at 400 Jasper Street, Camden, NJ 08104, or southcamdentheatre.org.

—Edward L. Wolfe