

## With high hopes, hard work, and a lot of elbow grease, a determined trio stages a comeback for Park Road's theatrical heritage

by Sarah Wesley-Lemire  
photos by Rich Wagner

**C**o-artistic director Darlene Zoller recalls spending the day with a surly repairman who was trying to fix the phone system at the soon-to-open Playhouse on Park theater. He had worked for hours on the roof, behind the walls and under desks before proclaiming the system had been fixed. "It's working fine," he enthused.

After calling the theater's line from her cell phone, a baffled Zoller said, "But it doesn't ring!" To which the phone man replied, "I'm sorry ma'am. The ringing is not my department."

■ The experience is just one of many that Zoller and Tracy Flater, executive director of Playhouse on Park, jokingly say could be fodder for a sitcom.

They're pretty sure that the craziness that has accompanied starting their own theater company more than a year ago would make for some seriously funny plotlines, and that "The Phone Man" could serve as an entire episode.

Flater met Zoller in 2000 through the Hartt School Community Division, where Zoller, a lifelong dancer and choreographer, was teaching.

Flater was on the board of directors and president of The Friends of Dance Connecticut. The two eventually ended up working together at the Hartt School and Zoller, seeking direction for her dance company – stop/time dance theater – asked Flater to serve as a business mentor and partner.

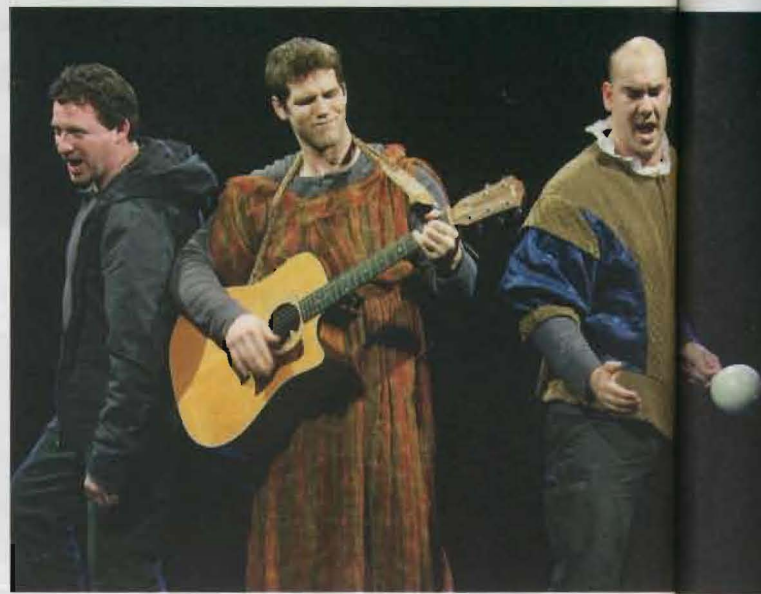
Zoller had also worked with Sean Harris, the director of theater at Hall High School in West Hartford, and with a common desire to create a performance space in Hartford, the three of them began discussing what it would mean to someday

own their own theater company.

They began their planning with the notion that they could potentially pull it off within two or three years. **What they didn't know was that starting their own theater group was more imminent than they had ever imagined.**

Zoller was seeking a space to host the annual stop/time dance theater performance and she determined that the Park Road Playhouse in West Hartford would be the perfect location.

She and Flater met with the executive director of the organization at the end of January 2009



Top left: Veroniqua Hurley has a pensive moment in *Charlotte's Web*.

Bottom left: Rich Hollman, Sean Harris and David Salsa provide some madcap musical entertainment in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*.

This page: Co-artistic Directors Darlene Zoller and Sean Harris relax with Executive Director Tracy Flater outside of Playhouse on Park in West Hartford.



to discuss possible dates. The meeting went well, but before long, she began hearing rumors that the playhouse, which had opened its doors in 2001, was going to close. Having already begun to publicize her upcoming recital and tailor the show to fit the stage, she called the landlord and begged for a reprieve: if Park Road Playhouse closed, could she still use the space for her recital?

That evening, she arrived home and found an e-mail from him, asking to talk. She called Flater, who had received the same e-mail, then got back to the owner, who confirmed that Park

Road Playhouse was shutting down. He said local businesses and organizations didn't want to see the space boarded up, but instead, wanted it to continue on as a performance space.

On April 1, 2009, Flater received a phone call asking if she and Zoller would be interested in taking it over. With "zero funding and zero time for funding," according to Flater, they "didn't even think" and jumped in with both feet.

With less than a shoestring budget, they weren't able to do much more than clean, make minor repairs and paint the

space, but within a few weeks, had converted it into what is now Playhouse on Park.

In taking it over, they knew they wanted to make both physical and fundamental changes. As Flater explained, Park Road Playhouse had been a community theater that had produced five shows yearly, most of them familiar plays from the 1960s and '70s.

But they had a different idea of what the playhouse should be; **they wanted it to be all things to all people.** "Our vision was that we wanted to meet the needs of a much broader

audience. Our play series is so diverse, we would never expect that you're going to come and say, 'I want to see every single one of these.' Our goal is that there would be three or four a year that appeal to you, and three or four that would appeal to someone whose tastes are completely different," Flater said.

Together, they formed the **Playhouse Theatre Group, Inc.** – with Flater serving as executive director, and Harris and Zoller as co-artistic directors. They worked tirelessly for two months and in June of last year, celebrated their grand opening.

But the launch of their new community theater wasn't without setbacks. On the day their season program was going to print, their corporate sponsor backed out, taking their funding with it. But they forged ahead regardless, accepting donations from personal sponsors and relying on ticket sales to keep things afloat. Both Zoller and Harris were working full-time jobs in addition to their time at the playhouse, so the situation was hardly a cakewalk.

"Last year was a huge struggle," said Zoller. "I don't know if any of us slept more than two or three hours a night."

They put together a season's worth of shows, including the comedy *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* and the recent musical *The Last Five Years*. They created a Young Audience Series for children, featuring new plays as well as familiar favorites such as *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. They filled the other nights with comedy, improv and dance, and offered classes and workshops as well.

After initial sellouts, ticket sales began to diminish, much to their surprise. The trio discovered that despite having painted the building front bright orange and making every effort to publicize Playhouse on Park, the theater was still relatively unknown.

"We [initially] thought, 'People

are going to know that we're here because there was a theater here already.' But it's amazing how many people live and work in West Hartford and have no idea that there's a performance space here," Flater said.

Zoller added that once people do come, they often return. "People who come to see us really realize the quality and the product that we have. **We can win you over; we just have to get you in the door.**"

Over the course of the past year, they've worked hard to get their name out there, and have finally begun to reap the rewards for their efforts. Playhouse on Park was voted **Best Playhouse** by readers of *Hartford Magazine*, and was also named in the *Advocate's* reader's poll. In June, the West Hartford Chamber of Commerce presented the playhouse founders with the Noah Webster award for their dedication to live theater. And as they gear up for a second season, they are excited by the prospect of another year and what it may hold in store for them.

They think what they've got is pretty unique, and Flater believes other people think so, too. "There have been so many people who have just come out of nowhere and are saying, 'What you guys have here is something special. I want to be a part of it.'"

Flater and Zoller emphatically point out that without the support of the community and a group of unfailing volunteers, they'd never make it. But ultimately, neither one fears failure because they are positive that they're on the right track.

According to Zoller, they're making a difference in both the lives of the people involved and the community at large.

"I think we could have an amazing impact on this community. It gives people another reason to come to West Hartford and it brings people to the area," she said.

In many ways, they feel they're "ahead of the game" in

terms of how far they've come, but they recognize that there are still some hurdles to jump. One of them, said Flater, is funding.

"Little by little, through the course of the last year, we had to prove ourselves to every single person, business and organization – one by one – that this is a place you would want to put your money, that you'd want to stand behind, that you'd want to support." With additional funding, the theater could "stabilize a little bit," allowing Flater, Harris and Zoller to focus more on the business of running the theater itself, instead of being distracted by all of the more mundane things that come up, like having to plunge the toilets.

But both Zoller and Flater are certain that, in time, it will come. Their good work and reputation continue to provide them with success and they are proud of what they've accomplished. They have just announced their 2010-2011 season. "I think [this theater is] meant to be, and we are so focused on our goal," said Zoller. Added Flater, **"We love every minute of what this is."**

And when things get crazy, they keep it all in check by simply looking at each other and saying, "We'll have to put this in the sitcom." **HM**



#### **Playhouse on Park**

244 Park Road, West Hartford  
(860) 523-5900  
[playhouseonpark.org](http://playhouseonpark.org)

#### **Side by Side by Sondheim**

September 8-19

#### **Brighton Beach Memoirs**

November 10-21

*Playhouse on Park is seeking volunteers, including concession workers, ushers and help with cleaning, marketing and box office. Personal and business sponsors are welcome.*