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All the state's a stage: N.J. performing artists begin program to connect with local theaters

By **Peggy McGlone**

Jonathan Wentz has lived in Whippany for 20 years, but it was only last month that his scene design work appeared on the stage of the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey in nearby Madison.

Wentz would prefer to work in New Jersey, but he spends much of the year on the road as a designer, technical director and scenic artist at theaters up and down the East Coast.

"Even Bonnie asked 'How is it you live 10 minutes from the theater and we didn't know about you?'" Wentz said, referring to Shakespeare's artistic director Bonnie Monte.

The answer is simple: New Jersey has a robust theater community but no central place for finding and hiring artists to work here.

Until now.

The New Jersey Theatre Alliance has introduced an artist membership program that allows actors, designers and other theater artists to interact directly with the alliance's three dozen professional theaters.

Maybe it's Jersey's suburban sprawl or the pull of Manhattan and Philadelphia, but performing artists who live here have had difficult making connections to local organizations, alliance executive director John McEwen said.

"We are trying to build a bridge," McEwen said. "We want them to feel engaged."

McEwen and the alliance worked with Fractured Atlas in New York City to craft a program individual theater artists would find valuable. For a \$75 annual fee, they will receive a profile page on the alliance website where they can post resumes, photos, and designs. They can participate in an online forum, receive priority scheduling for the alliance's annual audition and priority access to its annual designer showcase.

There will be workshops, roundtables with theater leaders and quarterly social events, starting with the July 14 pre-show party and performance of "Handicapped People in their Formal Attire" at Premiere Stages on the campus of Kean University in Union. At least 85 artists have signed up. Information and registration can be found at njtheatrealliance.org.

Wentz said such networking opportunities are especially welcome.

"The big thing is to network with individuals and theaters, to make more work in NJ," he said. "To keep artists in the state is to keep them busy."

Two River Theatre Company artistic director John Dias believes the theaters will also benefit from a stronger artist community.

"There are marvelous designers who live and work in New Jersey whose work I want to get to know more," Dias said. "It's a good thing when people get to know each other and get to see each other's work."

That's especially true for theater artists, said playwright EM Lewis, who moved from Los Angeles to Princeton two years ago.

"There's tons of talented people, but we're spreading across the state. Finding and connecting with them is something I've been trying to do, struggling to do," she said.

Lewis said the membership program will help artists seek out each other.

"If someone was looking for a local playwright they could find me. If I am looking for local actors, I could find some from this area," she said.

Lewis is regional representative of the New Dramatist Guild, the professional association of playwrights, composers, lyricists and librettists. She hopes the theater alliance membership will overlap with her New Dramatist work. Both are helping playwrights and others improve their art and find audiences.

And find work close to home.

"I'm just hoping that being more connected to other artists and to the theaters in New Jersey will help me stay in New Jersey," Wentz said.