

Dreams and 'Doubt':

The Red Barn Studio-Theater Arts and Education Center opens with its debut production next week

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RENAISSANCE PEOPLE, PLACES

About 18 months ago, Steve Bakunas bought a dilapidated, structurally compromised house on Third Street. It was surrounded by similarly neglected shacks with no functional utility whatsoever. It is the type of house with which many are familiar: "great potential, good investment property."

His initial impulse was to tear it down, but he recognized the "good bones" beneath its deterioration. This was probably a vision only an artist could imagine, and at the time he needed a studio to pursue his love for painting.

Having worked professionally as an actor, director, set designer, percussionist, wood sculptor and carpenter, it wasn't until seven years ago that Bakunas decided to try painting, after he had performed the title role in the play "Picasso." One of his artist friends guided him initially, but for the most part he became self-taught. Bakunas has since shown his work in Wilmington and New York. To date he has sold around 40 paintings, made up mostly of acrylics. His most recent work will be showcased as a promotional poster for the upcoming play "Doubt."

So Bakunas leveled, gutted, and remodeled the small craftsman-style house until it became a working studio space. Through a Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired, leaded-glass front door, natural light spills into the large, high-ceiling foyer. The chandelier, designed by Bakunas, is circular with small spotlights to illuminate his paintings on the walls. The main room is open, with recessed, movable spotlights. Bakunas has created a modern, functional space, without sacrificing the historic integrity of the house.

Then, one by one, he contacted the owners of adjacent properties and, with wife Linda Lavin, purchased four houses behind the studio, two of which are currently occupied by members of the theater community. When the former warehouse at the corner of the properties became available, he and Lavin envisioned the space as a theater arts and education center.

In this once derelict city block, color now creates aesthetic continuity to the little community. "Linda is a great designer," Bakunas said during our interview last week. "She chose all the colors and combination of colors. If it were left up to me, it would all be beige."

"We took a trip to Spain last summer," Lavin explained, "and I was really inspired by the depth and brightness of color—the reds, yellows and greens."

What they have constructed is now known as the Red Barn Studio-Theater Arts and Education Center. While it hasn't been used to house local shows yet, it has been consummated as an official link to the local theater community. Bakunas initially utilized the Red Barn Studio to construct the set for 2006's production "Art." It also acted as rehearsal space for the play. Likewise, Big Dawg Productions made similar use for "Moby Dick Rehearsed." Currently, Peter Jurasik ("Babylon 5,"

"Hill Street Blues") teaches acting classes and gives private lessons next door at the art studio. And in only one week, its first theatrical production will come to life with the premiere of "Doubt."

From what once was a broken-down structure, Red Barn has evolved into an intimate, 50-seat, black-box theater, which will include a theatrical library. Lavin's and Bakunas' ideas continue to flourish in the midst of its design. They envision workshops, drawing classes, films, and, if she can ever find the time, Lavin wants to teach a master acting class. It seems to be a Renaissance place, erected by Renaissance people, who have a strong drive to keep Wilmington's arts scene thriving.

BUILDING A TEAM

"According to Eleanor Roosevelt, 'The more you do, the more time you have.' I don't know how that works. Maybe it was the more you do, the crazier you feel," Lavin said. Singer, dancer, actor, director, producer, teacher—she certainly does it all.

"I don't stereotype myself or anybody," she said. "I think of myself as multi-faceted and able to do whatever I'm called on to do."

She is currently touring nationally with her cabaret "Songs and Confessions of a One-Time Waitress," which she describes as "a personal journey of my life through songs and stories." Her husband plays the drums in the accompanying jazz trio.

When they are not touring with the show or traveling for pleasure, they are at home on Front Street or at their New York apartment. They both seem to have spent their lives exploring every possible creative and artistic endeavor. Now they are enjoying "being in the moment," explained Bakunas. "We're at a point in our lives where we do what we want," Lavin agreed. "That's the gravy, the cream, to be able to choose the material and work with the people we love and respect."

They are quite a team.

Mutual friends tried to introduce the two, but they actually met by accident at the City Stage opening seven years ago. Bakunas proposed with a ring made up of five diamonds, one diamond for each year they had been together, and they married two years ago "because it's illegal to live together in North Carolina," Bakunas joked.

NO "DOUBT" A SUCCESS

To inaugurate The Red Barn Studio-Theater

Arts and Education Center first staging, as well as Lavin's first dramatic performance in Wilmington, the Tony and Pulitzer-Prize winning play "Doubt," by John Patrick Shanley, will open April 11th, which is already a sold-out show, as is April 14th, perhaps foreshadowing much success to come.

The provocative play is set in a Bronx Catholic

Joining the wife-and-husband team onstage are supporting actors Isabel Hebllich and Leslie Wiltshire, who play characters with "very strong opinions," according to Lavin. Hebllich is a writer, artist and actor, who had interviewed Lavin for the *StarNews*. "I just took to her," Lavin shared. "Her instincts and ability make her perfect for the part. She's extremely talented and absolutely beautiful."

New to the group is Leslie Wiltshire, who made her acting debut in "Crowns." While this will be her first non-singing performance, the theater veterans have been impressed with her professionalism. The inclusion of such supporting characters adds drama in the play amidst its moments of humor.

For "Doubt," both Lavin and Bakunas have teamed up with people who share their desire to make the local arts community a better one. Director Mike O'Neil, who has known Lavin since she moved to Wilmington, worked with Bakunas on the multi-building renovation project. Stage manager Dorothy Rankin has worked with them in preparation for Red Barn's debut production. "She's just the best," Lavin praised.

"Doubt" promises to be an exciting theatrical experience, in an exciting new venue. It's wise to make reservations for the show, which runs April 11th-14th, 18th-21st and 26th-27th at 8pm. Sunday matinees are at 3pm. Tickets are \$25; 910-762-0955.

A BRIGHT, COLORFUL FUTURE

Lavin and Bakunas continue to be creatively inspired and inspiring to others who wish to be a part of Wilmington's cultural progression

and gentrification. Currently, they are in the process of acquiring the last property behind the Red Barn, with plans to raze the existing, unsalvageable structure and landscape the space for picnickers and pets. Lavin and Bakunas are pet lovers and their dog, Stella, is part of the family, along with seven "inherited" cats.

They have donated a similar lot across Marsteller Street to the City of Wilmington for a park. This generosity of spirit combined, with a unique artistic vision will hopefully lead to a renaissance of the entire neighborhood. Downtown Wilmington needs more people with courage and imagination.

As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."



ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE: Renovations are complete at 1122 South 3rd Street, home to the Red Barn Studio-Theater Arts and Education Center, which opens its debut production 'Doubt' on April 11th, starring founders Linda Lavin and Steve Bakunas (right), who happily pose with their Number One fan, Stella.



school in 1964, and the story explores the conflict that ensues when Sister Aloysius (Lavin) suspects that Father Flynn (Bakunas) is involved in an improper relationship with one of the students.

Acting in the roles of antagonists has been challenging, according to Bakunas. "We kept cracking up during the early rehearsals." Lavin added that her husband is "a very handsome priest in great vestments," which, no doubt, also undermines the adversarial relationship of their characters. The most difficult role for an actor is one that is contrary to his own nature. It would be a simple acting assignment for Lavin and Bakunas to portray a loving couple, but creating the antithetical relationship of the characters in "Doubt" requires intense professional focus.

"We saw ["Doubt"] on Broadway and loved both the play and the production. It's a very thought-provoking, powerful story," Lavin revealed.