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That's show biz

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Saturday night, the coral-colored building on Route 1 in Northport will be filled with light, sound, color and the old razz-ma-tazz. It will be the gala grand opening of Northport Music Theater and marks the culmination of a long-held dream by a couple who have been a vital part of the Midcoast music scene for many years.

John and Ruth Gelsinger have made their livings with music for years, with John also working in the marine industry. Until a few days ago, large boats in dry-dock took up some of the theater's parking spaces. The theater building, located behind the couple's home, originally was a machine shop. Its conversion to a state-of-the-art theater space has been a long haul, with many an unexpected diversion.

"Who knew we'd have to reinforce the roof of a summer theater to withhold three feet of snow," mused John a few weeks ago.

The couple met around the time they both got involved in the early days of The Belfast Maskers, when the troupe's take on musicals showcased smart, funny, sharp, contemporary shows. Their collaborations, usually with Ruth as musical director and/or pianist and John as a singer/actor, included "Angry Housewives," which they co-music directed, "Pageant," "Pumpboys and Dinettes" and "The Boys from Swanville," an original outdoor multimedia theater event directed by Tobin Malone.

When the Gelsingers moved to Northport in 2004 — Malone, who lives in Camden and recently opened new real estate business WaterMark in Rockport, sold them the property — Ruth started mulling over the idea of small, seasonal, professional music theater. Having been involved in community theater since high school, when she played piano for a Camden Civic Theatre show, Ruth personally knows the amount of uncompensated talent and work that goes into any such endeavor. The couple started tossing around the idea of a small theater business that would treat each component, from acting to costuming to lighting, as a professional craft — i.e., those involved would be hired and paid for the task.

"We made up our mind in the summer of 2005. What really took the longest to do was come up with the business plan," said Ruth.

The summer of 2008 was considered, but this year became the start-up and it has been a busy one. Open auditions were held in January and casting went on for the rest of the winter. The first



The Northport Music Theater, very much a work in progress in January ...

season's casts feature both young performers still in college or just a few years out and seasoned local performers with many years under their theatrical belts. Ruth is the pianist and John the musical director for the summer's trio of shows; stage directors are Malone, Jason Bannister and Peter Clain.

The technical team also features both young and veteran talent. [Camden Hills Regional High School](#) student Nick Belley, who has helped run the school's famed Strom Auditorium, is running tech for the first show, which is being stage managed by [Belfast Area High School](#) grad Audra Curtis, fresh off her first year at University of Southern Maine and the Belfast Maskers' "The Glass Menagerie" (see review).

The show that will open the theater and the season is "The Musical of Musicals (The Musical!)," a fast and funny spoof of the Broadway musical that takes the "I can't pay the rent/you must pay the rent/I'll pay the rent" storyline and runs it through five different American musical theater models. Theater fans will find well-observed satire of Rogers & Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim, Jerry Herman, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Kander & Ebb.

Malone is known locally for directing Camden Civic Theatre's "A Streetcar Named Desire" and Belfast Maskers' "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest" and "The Boys from Swanville," among other productions. A small-cast musical is not the first thing that comes to mind for her, but she has said "The Musical of Musicals (The Musical!)" is so smart and truly funny that it really clinched the deal for her. She also praised the caliber of talent the Gelsingers have attracted for NMT's first season.



... will open with a gala performance Saturday night, June 16. Pictured are, front from left, John and Ruth Gelsinger, Wendy Schweikert and Tobin Malone; and on stage, Roger Marcotte, Jason Wilkes and Caitlin Whalen.

"We wanted to be a place for people with the skill set," John said.

Saturday night's gala grand opening will include a champagne reception with the cast: Caitlin Whalen, a University of Maine graduate who teaches music in the Winthrop school district and often performs in Waterville Opera House productions; Jason Wilkes, who will be a senior voice performance major in the fall at UMaine; Roger Marcotte of Rockland, just off his first year at University of Southern Maine; and this reporter, who has been performing on Midcoast stages for going on two dozen years. Marcotte, a [Rockland District High School](#) graduate, will appear in the July show, "Golf: The Musical"; and Whalen will return in August for "Six Women with Brain Death, or Enquiring Minds Want to Know."

Also on hand to greet patrons Saturday night will be costume designer Wendy Schweikert, a longtime Belfast Maskers talent, lighting director Brandon Koons, stage designer Frank Booker and choreographer Keith Robinson.

A week before "Musical" opened, there was still a lot to be dealt with. The power shut down in the theater and the Gelsingers' house during one rehearsal, forcing the company to sing under emergency lights. There were rumblings about health department requirements in regards to the intermission fare of Weaver's Bakery pies, soft drinks, beer and wine. The carpet still needed to be laid, and a local pair of domestic-gone-wild rabbits made a nest in chairs stored outside.

"I haven't slept in days," said John.

Sleep or no, the Northport Summer Theater is a dream this theater-loving couple is making come

true. Saturday's gala is sold out, which is a good start, but there are 14 other performances with 136 seats to fill before the month, and the "Musical," comes to an end. Then it's on to another opening, another show.

Regular performances of "The Musical of Musicals (The Musical!)" are 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, plus 3:30 p.m. matinees Thursdays and Saturdays beginning Tuesday, June 19 and running through Saturday, June 30. Tickets are \$25 for evening performance and \$20 for matinees, available by calling 338-8383 or online at <http://www.northportmusictheater.com>. A schedule of all three shows and information about cast and crew also is on the Web site.

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