

# SUNDAYPLUS



# SIX DEGREES OF JOHN RINGLING

Tracing the history and growth of the arts in Sarasota County

Jay Handelman Sarasota Herald-Tribune | USA TODAY NETWORK

In the wake of Sarasota County’s centennial celebration, it is a good time to explore part of what has made the area so appealing to visitors and residents – the arts and culture that blossomed in the community. Without them, Sarasota might be just another beachfront community.

- You might consider this list Six Degrees of John Ringling, because most of the growth in the arts occurred because he brought the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus to Sarasota for its winter quarters. Without the circus, there might not have been an influx of painters, musicians, performers and other artists who discovered Sarasota and wanted to have more to do and create. They helped give rise to the visual arts scene, theater, classical music, opera and ballet.
- And now it appears that the Ringling Bros. Circus, which shut down in 2017, may be making a comeback in the next two years.
- Here’s a look at key milestones in Sarasota’s vibrant arts scene.

John and Mable Ringling

The couple visited friends in Sarasota in 1909. By 1912, they bought their first winter home in the community and John Ringling started acquiring property with his brother Charles with a vision of creating a tourist resort. John and Mable bought property on the Sarasota Bayfront and commissioned construction of a 30-room mansion inspired by the Venetian Gothic palaces he had visited. It was designed by New York architect Dwight James Baum and built by Owen Burns. Ca’ d’Zan (House of John) was completed in 1926, the year Charles died and John became the only Ringling brother, continuing as president and manager of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Circus Winter Quarters

In 1927, with the local land boom collapsing, John Ringling decided to move the winter quarters of the circus to Sarasota from Bridgeport, Connecticut. The Sarasota Herald called it the “most startling and important announcement ever made in the history of Sarasota.” It would lead to decades of growth in the arts and cultural scene.

Sarasota Concert Band

The Sarasota Concert Band traces its history directly back to John Ringling because it is the successor organization to the Czecho-Slovakian National Band, which Ringling brought to Sarasota in 1925. A plaque on St. Armands Circle states that the group was among the Seven Virtues that Ringling sought for the community. The Sarasota Concert Band’s current organizational structure began in 1954 under the leadership of Arthur Rohr. The ensemble played up to a dozen free concerts per year at the Lido Beach Casino, the Ringling Museum Courtyard and, since its opening, at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall. It is also known for its annual Memorial Day Concert at Phillippi Estate Park. Among the music or artistic directors have been Tony Swain, Bill Pruyn and, since, 1997, William J. Barbanera.

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TOP: A view from the stage into the auditorium of the original Asolo Theatre at The Ringling. The Asolo Theatre Company was created there, but eventually moved into its own building. Touches of the original building were reconstructed at The Ringling as the Historic Asolo Theater.

PROVIDED BY ASOLO REP



ABOVE: The entrance to the Ringling Bros. circus winter quarters as it looked during the filming of “The Greatest Show on Earth.” PROVIDED BY SARASOTA COUNTY HISTORICAL RESOURCES

INSET: Either directly or indirectly, John Ringling led to an explosion of arts and culture organizations after he moved to Sarasota in the early 1900s. HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE



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Artistic Director William J. Barbanera leads the Sarasota Concert Band. He has led the band since 1997. COURTESY PHOTO

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## Sarasota Art Association/ Art Center Sarasota

Founded by Marcia Rader, an art supervisor in the Sarasota school system, the Sarasota Art Association was established in 1926 as a meeting place for local artists and art lovers. It held monthly meetings and exhibits before opening its now historic building on U.S. 41 in 1949. It was eventually renamed Art Center Sarasota. In 2012, the center marked 40 years of the association with an exhibit that highlighted some of the area’s most prominent artists, including Jack Cartlidge, William Hartman, Hilton and Dorothy Leach, Craig Rubadoux, Jan Silberstein, Syd Solomon and Ben Stahl.

## Players Theatre/Players Centre

The area’s oldest performing arts organization, the Players Centre for Performing Arts, dates back to 1929 with the efforts of Fanneal Harrison and Catherine Gavin, the owners of the Out-of-Door School. Not long after it’s founding, they built a venue at U.S. 41 across from the Art Association, where the company performed until the coronavirus pandemic. In the 1970s, a replacement building was created, which was demolished earlier this year. The company has moved into temporary quarters as it raises money for a new theater complex in Lakewood Ranch. Over the years, such stars (or future stars) as Montgomery Clift, Jayne Meadows, Charlton Heston and Polly Holliday appeared there.

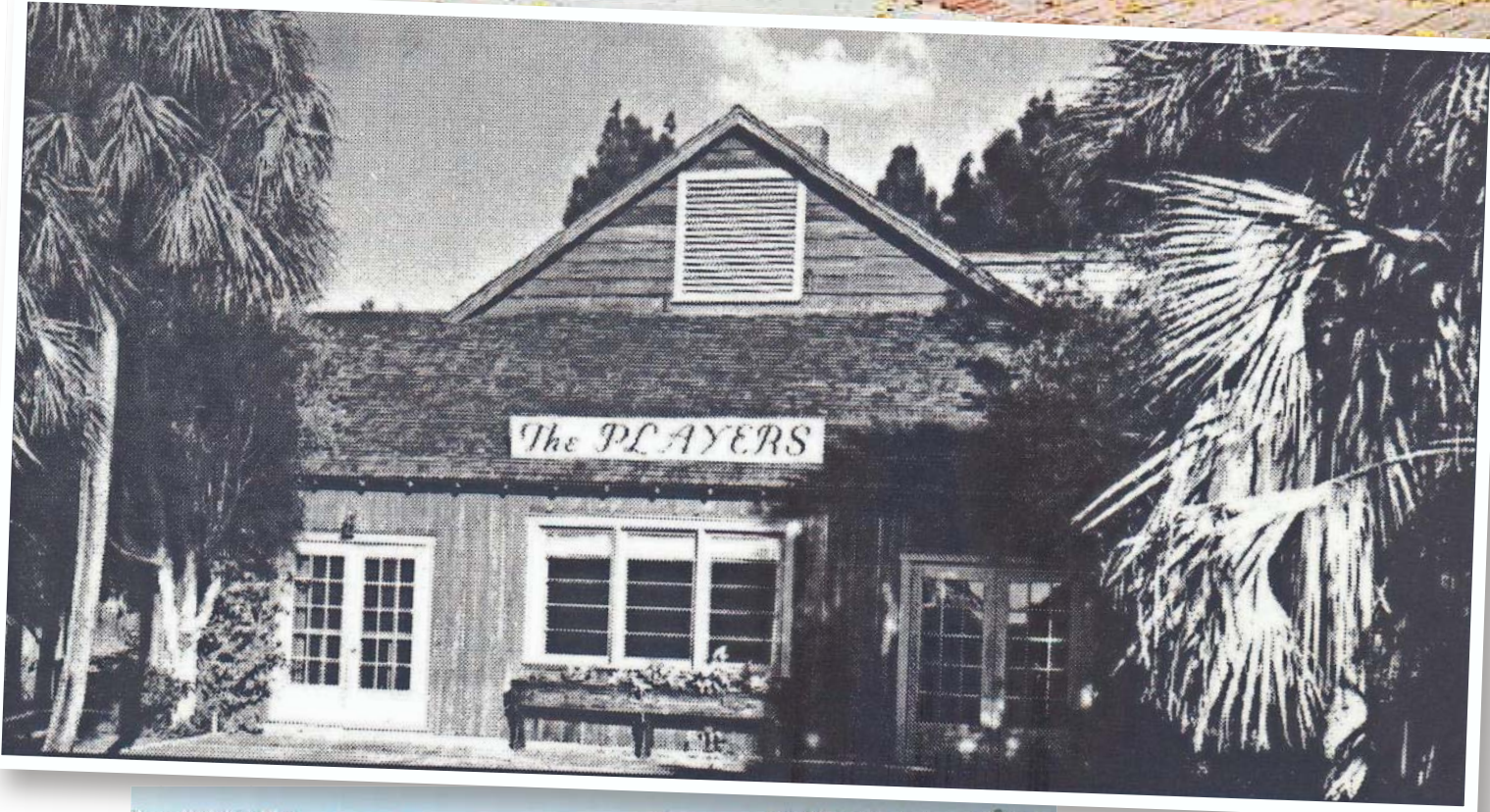
## The Ringling Museum

In addition to building a mansion, John Ringling created an art museum to house his extensive collection of paintings and sculptures. The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art opened to the public for the first time in 1931, and was turned over to the state of Florida on his death in 1936. After several years of struggling, it grew to become one of Florida’s major art museums.

## Ringling College of Art and Design

Ringling College of Art and Design marks its origins to conversations between John Ringling and leaders of what is now Florida Southern College in Lakeland. It opened as a branch of the college in 1931 as the School of Fine and Applied Art of the John and Mable Ringling Art Museum. It has grown into a four-year accredited college with a wide range of degree programs. It operates a growing number of galleries on campus, as well as the Sarasota Art Museum. Larry Thompson has been president of the college since 1999.

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ABOVE: The first Players Theatre, built in 1936, was designed by noted Sarasota architect Ralph Twitchell. The company created a more modern facility in the 1970s and is now raising funds for a new theater complex in Lakewood Ranch. PROVIDED BY THE PLAYERS

TOP: Art Center Sarasota traces its roots to the formation of the Sarasota Art Association in 1926. COURTESY PHOTO

LEFT: An aerial view of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, which was left to the state of Florida on the death of John Ringling. PROVIDED BY RINGLING MUSEUM



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‘Chick’ Austin builds Ringling history

As important as the Ringlings were to Sarasota’s arts development, A. Everett “Chick” Austin, the first director of The Ringling Museum, may be even more so. He purchased paintings, prints, drawings, scenic and costume renderings and Venetian furniture for a theater college. More importantly, he decided the museum needed a theater. In 1954, he won approval to build a new wing for a jewel box theater imported from Asolo, Italy, which later became home to the beginnings of both Asolo Repertory Theatre and the Sarasota Opera. Theater performances were held there, but in the summer of 1959, faculty at Florida State University started using it for a summer theater company featuring students in restoration comedies. That summer operation grew into what is known today as Asolo Repertory Theatre. Asolo Rep moved out of its original home, now known as the Historic Asolo Theater, and created its own building adjacent to the museum that it now shares with the Sarasota Ballet. The building and the museum are now part of Florida State University, which also operates a graduate acting conservatory in Sarasota.

Sarasota Orchestra

The Sarasota Orchestra made its debut in 1949 as the Florida West Coast Symphony, under the baton of Dr. Lyman Wiltse. In 1961, Paul Wolfe took over as the orchestra’s third music director, a post he would hold for a remarkable 36 years. He was followed by Leif Bjaland and Anu Tali. The orchestra is currently in the midst of a search for a new music director and for a site for its own symphony center. It also operates a major youth orchestra program and hosts the annual summer Sarasota Music Festival, which brings in 60 young musicians to train and perform with professional artists for three weeks.

Asolo Repertory Theatre

In 1959, faculty at Florida State University used The Ringling’s Asolo Theatre for a summer theater company featuring students appearing in restoration comedies like “The Rivals,” “The Servant of Two Masters” and “The Beggar’s

Opera.” In 1966, it switched from summer to year-round operations and eventually became one of the major repertory theater companies in the country. Now under the artistic leadership of Michael Donald Edwards, Asolo Repertory Theatre launched its 64th season this fall.

FSU/Asolo Conservatory

In 1973, Florida State University moved its graduate acting program from its home base in Tallahassee to Sarasota, where it continues to operate in conjunction with Asolo Repertory Theatre. Over the course of three years, students perform their own season of shows, including outdoor Shakespeare during their second year. In their final year, they become members of the Asolo Rep company and also tour a Shakespeare play for school students across the state. When they graduate, the students are eligible to join Actors’ Equity Association. As many as 1,500 students audi-

tion for one of the 12 spots open each school year.

Sarasota Opera

Around the same time that the Asolo Theatre space was being used for theater performances, it also provided a home for touring opera productions. In 1958, a group of Sarasota residents were in the audience to see Julius Rudel conduct members of the New York City Opera in a performance of “The Abduction from the Seraglio.” It marked the start of what would grow into the Sarasota Opera company. For years, the Asolo Opera Guild presented touring performances by the Turnau Opera Players of Woodstock, New York, presenting chamber-sized operas in the chamber-sized theater space. It started presenting its own productions in 1974 at the Asolo Theatre. In 1979, the organization purchased the Edwards Theatre, a former vaudeville and movie house, which became the Sarasota Opera House in downtown

Sarasota, allowing for larger and more elaborate productions. Since 1982, Victor DeRenzi has served as artistic director. He led the company through the Verdi Cycle, a 28-year effort to perform all the works of Giuseppe Verdi. The Sarasota Opera House also hosted the world premiere of Cecil B. DeMille’s Academy Award-winning film “The Greatest Show on Earth.”

Sarasota Ballet

In 1987, under the auspices of the Sarasota Opera, former ballerina Jean Weidner Goldstein launched a program called Opera Presents Ballet, featuring touring performances by a variety of dance troupes. In 1990, Ballet Eddy Toussaint de Montreal was named the resident ballet company, forming the basis for the Sarasota Ballet. Toussaint was replaced four years later by Robert DeWarren, former director of Ballet at

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The historic A.B. Edwards Theatre in downtown Sarasota is now the home of the Sarasota Opera House. The company got its start with touring performances at The Ringling’s Asolo Theater. TOP: The Sarasota Art Museum of Ringling College. ABOVE CENTER: The Sarasota Orchestra made its debut in 1949 as the Florida West Coast Symphony and used the Sarasota Municipal Auditorium as its performance home. ABOVE LEFT: A. Everett “Chick” Austin was the first director of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art from 1946 until his death at age 56 in 1957. ABOVE: PROVIDED BY SARASOTA OPERA; TOP: HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE; CENTER: PROVIDED BY SARASOTA ORCHESTRA; TOP LEFT: PROVIDED BY THE RINGLING



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Acrobats were featured in Matthew Hart’s “John Ringling’s Circus Nutcracker,” an original piece created for The Sarasota Ballet. FRANK ATURA/THE SARASOTA BALLET

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Teatro alla Scala Milan, who served until 2007. Toussaint and DeWarren were choreographers. Iain Webb, who was named director in 2008, is a former dancer who has used his broad connections to bring the works of George Balanchine, Kenneth MacMillan and Sir Frederick Ashton to the company, leading to widespread international coverage of the company.

Florida Studio Theatre

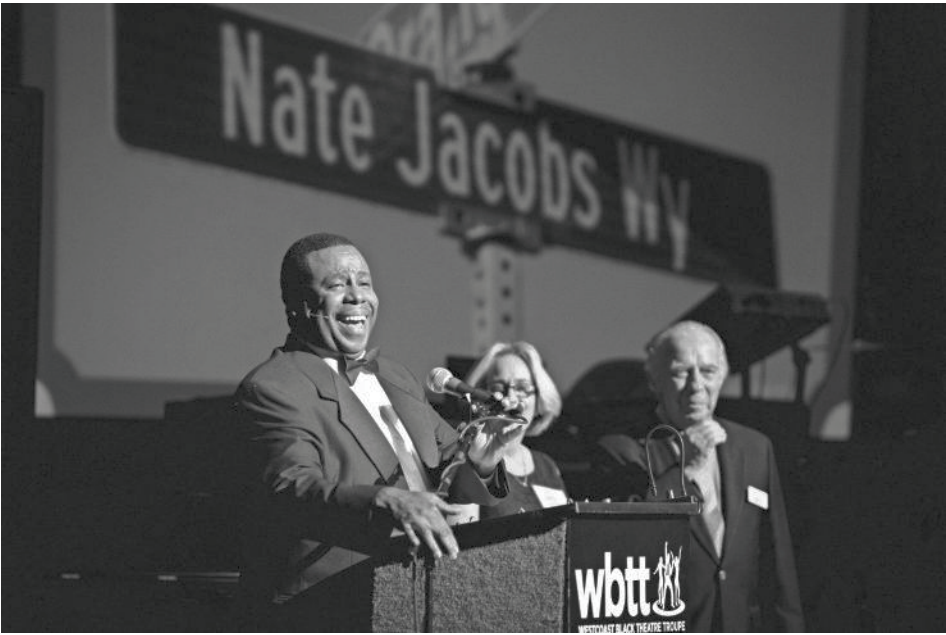
Once billed as Sarasota’s experimental theater, Florida Studio Theatre was founded in 1973 by Jon Spelman, who had served as an associate artistic director of Asolo Rep and an assistant professor of theater at FSU. He intended it as an alternative to what was then called the Asolo State Theater, by bringing theater to the people in prisons and homeless shelters. But he struggled to make it work financially. In 1980, Richard Hopkins, a former resident actor at the Asolo who had previously started a company that became American Stage in St. Petersburg, was named artistic director. He is now CEO and producing artistic director, overseeing a company that includes five theater spaces in three buildings on a sprawling campus in downtown Sarasota, as well as residential property. It has grown to have one of the largest subscription audience bases among regional theaters in the country, with its offerings of mainstage dramas and musicals, original cabaret productions and improvisational performances.

Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe

Nate Jacobs was once an actor at Asolo Rep, where he recalls playing mostly servant roles that weren’t satisfying. He also appeared occasionally in cabaret shows when Florida Studio Theatre presented them at the old Paradise Cafe. He was hired to direct a primarily Black show each year by the Players Centre, which led him to start thinking of creating his own company. He launched the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe in 1999, and he continues to serve as artistic director, providing opportunities and training to many young artists who might not have had access to the theater. The company had a nomadic beginning, bouncing from one theater space to another (even using the central



The Woman’s Club of Sarasota, which was completed in 1915, became the home of Florida Studio Theatre, which was founded in 1973. PHOTO PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD



Nate Jacobs, founder and artistic director of the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe at the company’s 15th anniversary celebration in 2014, with Executive Director Julie Leach and former board chairman Howard Millman. HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE

courtyard at Art Center Sarasota), before Christine Jennings helped wipe out years of debt and former Asolo Rep producing artistic director Howard Millman helped set Jacobs on a path to success. Today, WBTT owns its own newly renovated theater building and an adjoining administrative and education wing, with a fiercely loyal support base.

Urbanite Theatre

One of Sarasota’s newest professional theaters has its ties to Ringling through the FSU/Asolo Conservatory, where founders Summer Dawn Wallace and Brendan Ragan earned their Master of Fine Arts degrees. Both stayed in the Sarasota area and partnered with developer and theater lover Harry Lipstein, who built the Urbanite Theatre, which can seat 50-70 people in downtown Sarasota. Since opening in 2015 with the British sex-trafficking drama “Chicken

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The Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall is host to a variety of concerts, comedy, dance and touring Broadway musicals. HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE

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Shop,” it has produced a series of diverse, often dark and challenging plays never before produced in the area. It launched a women’s playwriting festival and, during the pandemic, it presented the limited-capacity “Safe House” to keep operations going before returning to more normal operations in the fall.

### Circus Sarasota

If it weren’t for the Ringling Bros. bringing the winter quarters to Sarasota, there likely would be no Circus Sarasota or its umbrella organization the Circus Arts Conservatory. It was founded in 1977 as the National Circus School of Performing Arts by Dolly Jacobs, – daughter of famed clown Lou Jacobs and an aerialist who toured for eight years herself with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus – and Pedro Reis, a trapeze artist who spent a year traveling with Ringling Bros.

Each winter season, it presents a one-ring show under a big top tent featuring an international array of acts. In 2011, it took over operations of the Sarasota Sailor Circus, which was founded in 1949 as part of the Sarasota High School gymnastics program. It is billed as “The Greatest ‘Little’ Show on Earth” and is one of the longest-running youth circuses in the country.

The organization’s name was changed to the Circus Arts Conservatory in 2013 as its operations grew, including numerous educational programs for seniors, adults and children.

### Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall

Though there are no direct ties to John Ringling, the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall does serve as the home for the Ringling College Library’s Town Hall Lecture Series.

Since it opened in 1971, it has presented hundreds of musicians, singers, comedians and Broadway performances (and a few circus artists) in the distinctive purple hall on the Sarasota Bayfront. Plans are underway to create a new and larger hall within the new Bay Park Conservancy.

### The Venice Symphony

Another organization without direct ties to Ringling, the Venice Symphony was launched in 1974 with volunteer musicians (including an 86-year-old French horn player and an 8-year-old violinist) under the leadership of Hartley Haines who was the public schools’ music director. He was succeeded by music teacher Ernesto Epistola and in 1989 by Wesley John Schumacher, who led the group for 20 years. Kenneth Bowermeister and Imre Pallo succeeded him until Troy Quinn was named music director in 2018.



Circus Sarasota, presented by the Circus Arts Conservatory, is an annual winter big top show. The nonprofit company was established more than 20 years ago by two veteran performers of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, Pedro Reis and his wife, Dolly Jacobs. THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE



Wesley John Schumacher led the Venice Symphony for 20 years as music director. PROVIDED BY VENICE SYMPHONY

### Venice Theatre

Originally called Venice Little Theatre, this company got its start in 1950 with a group of people organized by founders Muriel Olds-Dundas and Sonia Terry who wanted to get together with other theater lovers. They rented an abandoned barracks/warehouse at the former Venice Army Air Base and started turning it into a theater. In 1971, the Kentucky Military Institute closed its Venice campus, and the theater purchased a former gymnasium for \$78,000. Over the years, through hundreds of productions and under a variety

of leaders, Venice dropped “little” from its name and became Venice Theatre, one of the largest community theaters in the nation.

### Sarasota Art Museum of Ringling College

One of the newest arts organizations on the block opened in December 2019, just months before the COVID pandemic forced it to shut down briefly. It is the result of years of planning and fundraising by a committed group of local residents who wanted to see more contemporary art in the community. They came



Larry Thompson, seen in this 2009 photo, has been president of Ringling College of Art and Design since 1999. During his tenure, he has expanded the school’s offerings and the size and scope of its campus.

CHIP LITHERLAND/HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE

together to transform the old and historic Sarasota High School building into a home for traveling and original exhibitions. To ensure that it happened, the organizers merged their operation with Ringling College of Art & Design, which now operates the museum. Founding director Anne-Marie Russell left five years after completing and opening the project. Her successor, Virginia Shearer, is the former education director at The Ringling Museum.

Follow Jay Handelman on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Contact him at [jay.handelman@heraldtribune.com](mailto:jay.handelman@heraldtribune.com).